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ARTISTS' DIVISION
(GRADE SIX)

CHAPTER IV

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IV
BRAHMS AS A COMPOSER FOR THE PIANO

Excepting Schumann there is scarcely another composer of the classical school whose works are less imbued with evidences of traditional piano idioms than Brahms. This may easily be accounted for when one couples the more lyric elements of modern and highly elaborated counterpoint with the earlier monophonic style. In the works of Bach of course we find little or nothing to be desired in the matter of contrapuntal development. Bach stands as a monumental figure in musical history, his piano works typifying the highest development of the pianistic idiom in conjunction with the polyphonic style of composition, just as his organ and violin works typify an equally dominating position in their respective realms. In these works for the piano, we find within the compass of a few octaves and of two hands the most marvelous variety of counterpoint ever penned. This is always pianism of the purest style. Set against this are many prior examples of the monophonic style wherein a single melody is accompanied by the foundation of various *chord* forms, and which make use of a much greater scope as regards the compass of the keyboard, but which do not represent counterpoint in its strict sense.

The simplest outward comparison which may be made between the monophonic style of composition and the more extended works of Brahms is that the latter combine the counterpoint of Bach with the lyricism of Chopin and also make use of the greater compass of the modern piano. The effect necessarily is orchestral as well as pianistic. We never find the monophonic mannerisms in the larger works of Brahms. In the Hungarian Dances of course the *broken chord* forms are used extensively, but in the main one finds only the highest developed contrapuntal forms employed in the more serious piano works of this serious master. True there are many *broken chord* figures, but these are used thematically rather than as accompaniment. Repeated chord figures would be impossible to conceive in connection with Brahms. Even though rhythmic figures may seem to be but chord designs they invariably represent separate voice leadings in contrapuntal design.

Besides this exterior view, it would be strange if other inherent traits were not evident. Compared with the ultra-lyric music of Chopin, the tone of which must invariably place it high above its pinnacled foundation, the music of Brahms is in tone both the solid foundation and the superstructure combined. This again is the influence of the orchestral idiom which Brahms was among the first to infuse into his piano compositions. The massive solidity of the structure of his works could produce no other effect. Brahms is not a harmonic anarchist in any sense; his formulas are quite in accord with those of the older masters. He has merely developed the material along the lines which were suggested by his predecessors. As to his "voice" or message, that can be heard only by one who is attentive while he speaks. The capacity to understand this composer is necessarily secured through the understanding of those masters who preceded him, for like Bach, his works form a compendium of all former opinions.

VARIATIONS AND FUGUE
ON A THEME BY HANDEL
JOHANNES BRAHMS

Opus 24

These variations of Brahms' on a Theme by Handel constitute a truly monumental effort, worthy of comparison with the "Thirty-Two Variations" of Beethoven, a work which in general character it resembles. It is the production of a composer who busied himself with the creation of art works in the field of chamber music, vocal works and compositions for the piano, until he was forty-three, at which age he produced his first Symphony [opus 68]. Small wonder then that his mastery of existing technic was such that it was called "the Tenth," following on where Beethoven left off after his "Ninth."

Brahms, with some notable exceptions, appeals at first to the intellect rather than to the heart; these Variations and the colossal Fugue with its

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Organpoint in the Peroration, arouse amazement at the wealth of resource and invention employed on such slender harmonic material as the Handel Air presents, though melodically and rhythmically it exhibits considerable variety.

To appreciate fully this great work the student should first become familiar with the variations which Handel himself wrote on the same Theme. They constitute the last half of "Trois Leçons" No. 1. As the original variations are rather inaccessible they are included in this Chapter for comparison. The student who analyzes these two sets of variations with attention to the spirit, rather than the letter, will find that Brahms developed his work from the whole and not merely from a small part of the Handel work. In other words, he has "varied the variations"—employing not only the Theme, but each of Handel's Variations, thus raising the earlier set "to a higher power," so to speak. Seldom has such a feat been attempted in musical composition. Only perfect familiarity with the Variations of both masters will show how Brahms has taken each one of the original set and further developed it in his own way.

THE THEME.—The *tempo* of the Theme or "Aria" should be moderate, and the style *cantabile* and *legato*. Great care must be taken with the Trills. In Handel's time most Trills were begun on the upper auxiliary. This is a point which must be left to the personal taste of the performer—whether to observe the ancient or the modern custom, but a satisfactory compromise would seem to lie in beginning the Trill on the principal note when the preceding melody note is one staff-degree removed, and on the upper auxiliary when the preceding note is on the same degree, or removed by the Interval of a Third. Applying this principle, the Trills in measure 1, 2, 3 and 7 would begin on the principal note, all others on the auxiliary.

VARIATION I.—The melody, though partly *staccato*, must be sung clearly, with a sort of quiet resolution. Avoid excess action of the wrist, and see that the continuous rhythm of *sixteenth* notes, interchanged between the hands, is very even. The scale passage at the end of each part must be played in a very fleet, flexible manner.

VARIATION II.—The melody must not stand out too much, the effect desired is rather one of interwoven sound, the four voices melting into one another. This Variation might be imagined as played by the wood-wind section of the orchestra.

VARIATION III.—Here not much wrist action is needed. The hands fall softly on the first *eighth* note of the motive and rise lightly off the second note. Both the melodic idea and the figuration run through the parts for both hands —a sort of rhythmic dialogue. This Variation should be played with an intimate, soft color, characteristic of Brahms.

VARIATION IV.—An important point to be observed in this Variation is the proper execution of the *sforzando* Octaves, which should be played with a "throw-off" touch in order to separate them sufficiently. A more sturdy mood asserts itself in this Variation. The pupil is advised not to attempt a rapid *tempo,* but to infuse a resolute character into the rhythm.

VARIATION V.—This Variation suggests the mellow tone of the clarinet. The melody should stand out clearly above the accompanying figures. Up to this point each Variation has been in the *major mode,* but here the Key of *B-flat minor* appears for the first time, preparing for the more significant treatment of the Theme to be found in the Variation following.

VARIATION VI.—Here the *tempo* of the preceding Variation is continued evenly. This Variation should be kept in a *sotto voce* mood throughout. The rather obvious canon in the Octave is sufficiently plain without the player's presenting it in such a way as to force its structure unduly to the front. A more artistic treatment would be to create an air of mystery in the first part and one of apprehension in the second, and let the canon take care of itself. True, the canon is important—in a sense it is the most significant thing about the Variation, but it is an example of the highest kind of art, the kind that conceals art, and should be presented in a way which will make obvious its emotional content, rather than its technical structure.

VARIATION VII.—In this Variation the rhythmic element is paramount. The melody of the Theme is found in the inner voice. The *tempo* is not any faster than that of the preceding Variation, but the rhythm is snappy and invigorating, and is an important factor in the Variation following. Imagine the effect of this Variation if played by trumpets and French horn.

VARIATION VIII.—The rhythmical figure of three notes in the left-hand part should be practised with the fingering 3 2 1 and 3 3 3, the latter fingering demanding more command of the wrist than the former. Study the right-hand part alone until the polyphonic features are well

understood. Two different moods are represented in this Variation, the bright mood of the first part and the somber one of the second part.

VARIATION IX.—The *sixteenth* notes in this Variation have almost the effect of Grace notes, but they are more significant, as is shown by the *sforzando* indication. The pedaling is of much importance. With the exception of one place in the last measure, the fingering is that of Brahms himself. In the place referred to, the suggestion to take the three *eighth* notes with the right hand, though unusual, will be found the more practical for some hands.

VARIATION X.—This Variation is military in character. The trumpet motives must receive short and sharp accents. The group of small notes with which each phrase begins may be played with considerable boldness, and from this point the phrases diminish to *pianissimo.* A short Pedal on each count is recommended.

VARIATIONS XI and XII.—These two Variations may best be considered together. A quiet, happy, placid mood is depicted in XI. These same characters continue in XII, but with more emotional warmth, subdued yet present. The two Variations might be called feminine and masculine in their mood.

VARIATION XIII.—With this Variation an abrupt change is made from the peaceful to the gloomy. This Funeral March should be sung with a full, deep tone; *forte,* but never becoming harsh. The quintuple groups are played *quasi pesante.* At the beginning of the Variation the *arpeggio* chords in the left-hand part are played heavily and deliberately, not with a quick roll —but in the last four measures they should be played *plaqué.*

VARIATION XIV.—A fluent technic for Sixths and Octaves is indispensable for this Variation. The Trills begin with the principal tone and should continue evenly through the Grace Notes to the following melody tone. The left-hand part is not a mere *broken* interval accompaniment—it has melodic value, and must be infused with warmth and life. Do not allow these detached figures to sound dry.

VARIATIONS XV and XVI.—These two Variations are closely associated; they should be played together, with no interruption. In XV the military character again predominates. Much care should be taken to separate the *motives,* and to outline the phrases by well-placed accents. In XVI the same melodic *motive* is developed canonically. The student should understand well that this Variation is NOT a canon, but merely canonic; that is, somewhat LIKE a canon.

VARIATION XVII.—This Variation is played somewhat faster than the preceding one, but the same placid mood which charcterized XVI continues. The motive of two *eighth* notes, extending through nearly the whole measure in the right-hand part, is answered in the Bass; this imitation in the left hand should be in an entirely different tone-color than the notes for the left hand which precede it.

VARIATION XVIII.—In studying this Variation the student is advised first to practise the syncopated figure, as it shifts between the hands, then the *sixteenth* note figure—until the continuity of both is well under control. This is one of the most difficult of the set, and needs a clear appreciation of its harmonic structure on the part of the player, as much as a fluent technic.

VARIATION XIX.—A joyful mood and a suggestion of pastoral feeling permeate this Variation. The Inverted Mordents are given a slight accent.

VARIATION XX.—The texture here again suggests orchestral coloring. A rather gloomy, somber mood pervades this Variation, which might be played in a manner suggesting a subterranean disturbance, which continually threatens to break loose, but which never does. This Variation reaches no climax, and ends as discontentedly as it began.

VARIATION XXI.—Here the *B-flat* tonality, in both its *major* and *minor modes,* is happily relieved by a change of Key to *G minor.* The melody of the Theme, after the first count, is in the Grace notes. Much independence of the hands is required in playing the three-against-four rhythm. These figures should blend well together, and not sound as though they were pitted against each other.

VARIATION XXII.—This Variation is in the style of a Musette, on a drone Bass figure. The composer probably had in mind the oboes, clarinets and bassoons. Accentuation and *sostenuto* are the chief requirements. The *tempo* should be spirited, though not too lively.

VARIATION XXIII.—This is the first of a group of three Variations, forming the last of the set. XXIII, XXIV and XXV are written in the same spirit, and should be played without any interruption; they constitute a continually growing climax. Begin XXIII in a *quasi* hesitating manner, with an almost sinister suggestion. In the second part observe the *crescendo* from *p* to *f* within the time of four notes.

VARIATION XXIV.—Here the characteristic *motive* is the figure in *sixteenth* notes. The style of the Variation is more obviously technical than any of the preceding. Evenness in the scale passages is of course essential.

VARIATION XXV.—This Variation is to be played *fortissimo* throughout. Care should be taken that the *martellato* style does not become disjointed or ragged, and the student should distinguish carefully between the figures with the *sixteenth* rest and those with the *dotted eighth* note. It is permissible to take all the time necessary to play the *thirty-second* and *sixty-fourth* note figures clearly. Do not try to crowd them; use an elastic but symmetrical rhythm.

THE FUGUE.—The Subject ends on the first note of the third measure. Appearing first in the Alto, it is announced successively by the Soprano (3) Bass (5), and Tenor (7). The Exposition closes at the beginning of the ninth measure, and two measures later (11) the Subject appears in Sixths. After this is a rather lengthy Episode, the Subject not appearing again until measure 25, although portions of it are constantly present in various parts. Up to this point the Fugue should not receive a brilliant rendition, although its texture is of such a nature as to tempt the player to do this. Particular attention must be given to the values of the *sixteenth* rests with which this Fugue abounds—they are almost as important as the notes, and if they are neglected much of the snappy, virile character of the Fugue will be lost.

The entrance of the Subject in measure 25 seems to call for some explanation, as the composer's notation is not perfectly clear. The notes for the left hand represent two voices, not one. The Subject is in the Tenor, while the low notes, up to the *F* on the first count of the measure following, belong to the Bass, and should be played with a deliberate, pressure touch, in order to distinguish them from the notes of the Subject. The modulation to *D-flat* a few measures later is played *sotto voce,* creating an atmosphere of quiet charm, to be superseded later by a burst of virtuosity lasting until the end of the work.

With the entrance of the Subject in Octaves (39) there may be a tendency to play too fast. Such "running away" can be checked by paying careful attention to the values of the *quarter* notes and the *sixteenth* rests.

In measure 49 the Subject enters in augmentation, announced in the Bass, followed immediately by an announcement in the Tenor, in the original rhythm. After a second appearance of the Subject in augmentation (55) a lengthy Episode occurs, leading into a double presentation of the Subject—in its original form and in contrary motion at the same time (75). This is the last complete appearance of the Subject.

The final section begins in measure 82, where commences a magnificent Organpoint, enriched by a free, imaginative treatment of fragments of the Subject and of previous counterpoints. The virtuosity needed in this passage is only attainable by separate mastery of the parts for both hands. The Coda may be taken at a faster *tempo,* but the student is again warned to give full values to the *quarter* notes and the *sixteenth* rests. Observe the harmonic richness in the final measures, particularly the ingenious way in which the composer keeps up interest by his insistent cadences in *F,* a Key one hardly expects at this point, but by dwelling on it he makes the final triumphant entry of *B-flat,* three measures before the end, all the more effective.

The student will find many interesting items in regard to Brahms and his music as well as his playing, in Florence May's "Life of Johannes Brahms." In discussing this set of Variations quotations are made from a letter written in 1861 by a musician who heard Brahms himself play them. "A magnificent work! Splendidly long—the stream of ideas flowing inexhaustibly! And the work was splendidly played too. The composition is so difficult that none but great artists could attempt it."

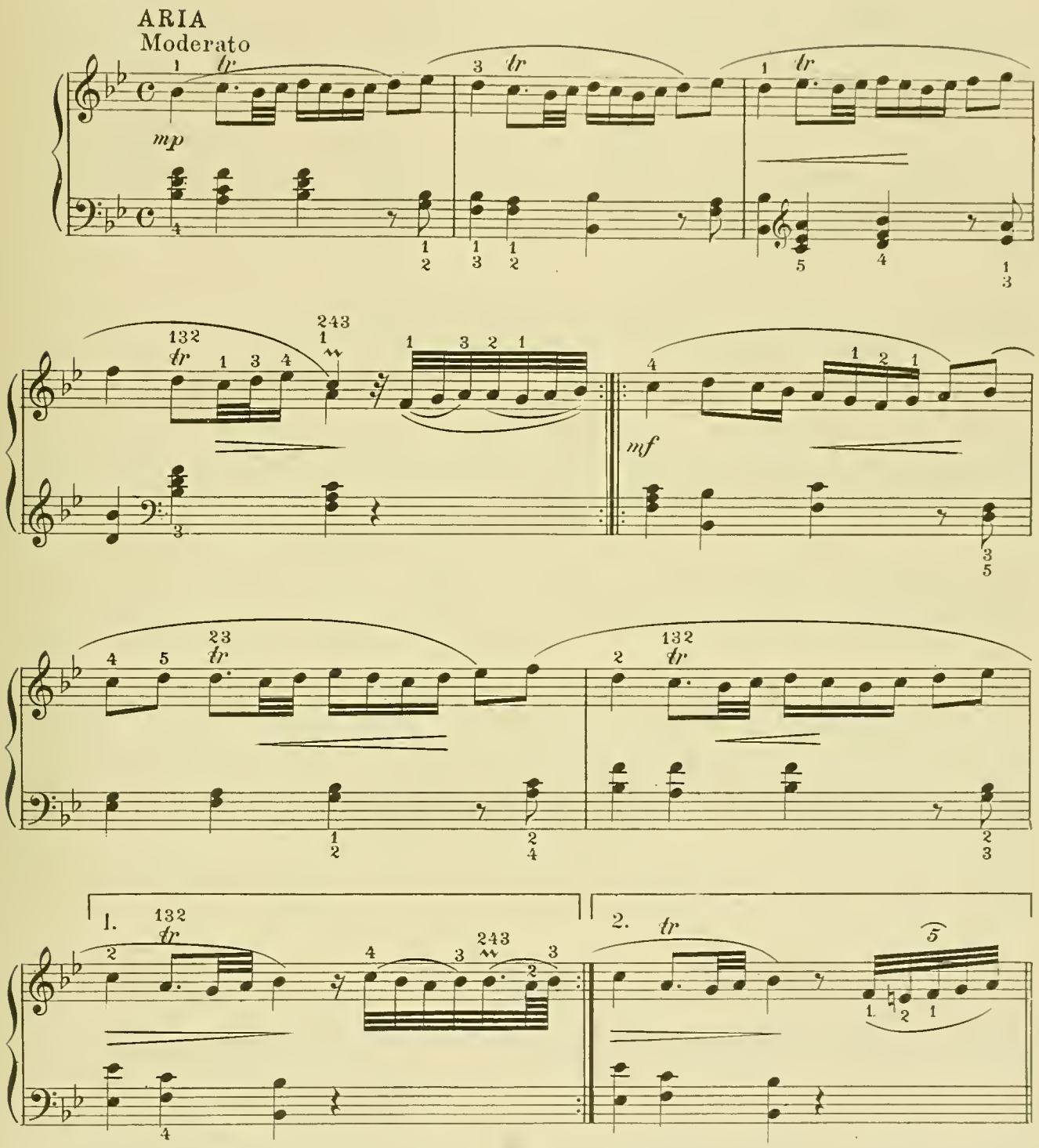
To-day, nearly sixty years later, this comment as to the difficulty does not apply so definitely. It is in the repertoire of many artists, especially those lovers of his art who have learned his particular technic, which demands of the player certain qualities of endurance and grip. They do not find the performance of his works unduly fatiguing. "The variations," writes Miss May, "show a melodious fertility and power of invention which is practically inexhaustible. Each variation or pair of variations presents some fresh idea, some striking change of fancy, figuration, rhythm, mood, to hold the listener's attention, while the entire long work is essentially based upon the simple harmonic progression of Handel's theme . . . The Finale, the great free Fugue which invariably brings down a house, is a unique example of its kind, with its grand and brilliant climax to which extraordinary effect is imparted by an original employment of the Dominant pedal point."

VARIATIONS AND FUGUE

On a theme by Händel

Edited by
Hague Kinsey

JOHANNES BRAHMS
Op. 24



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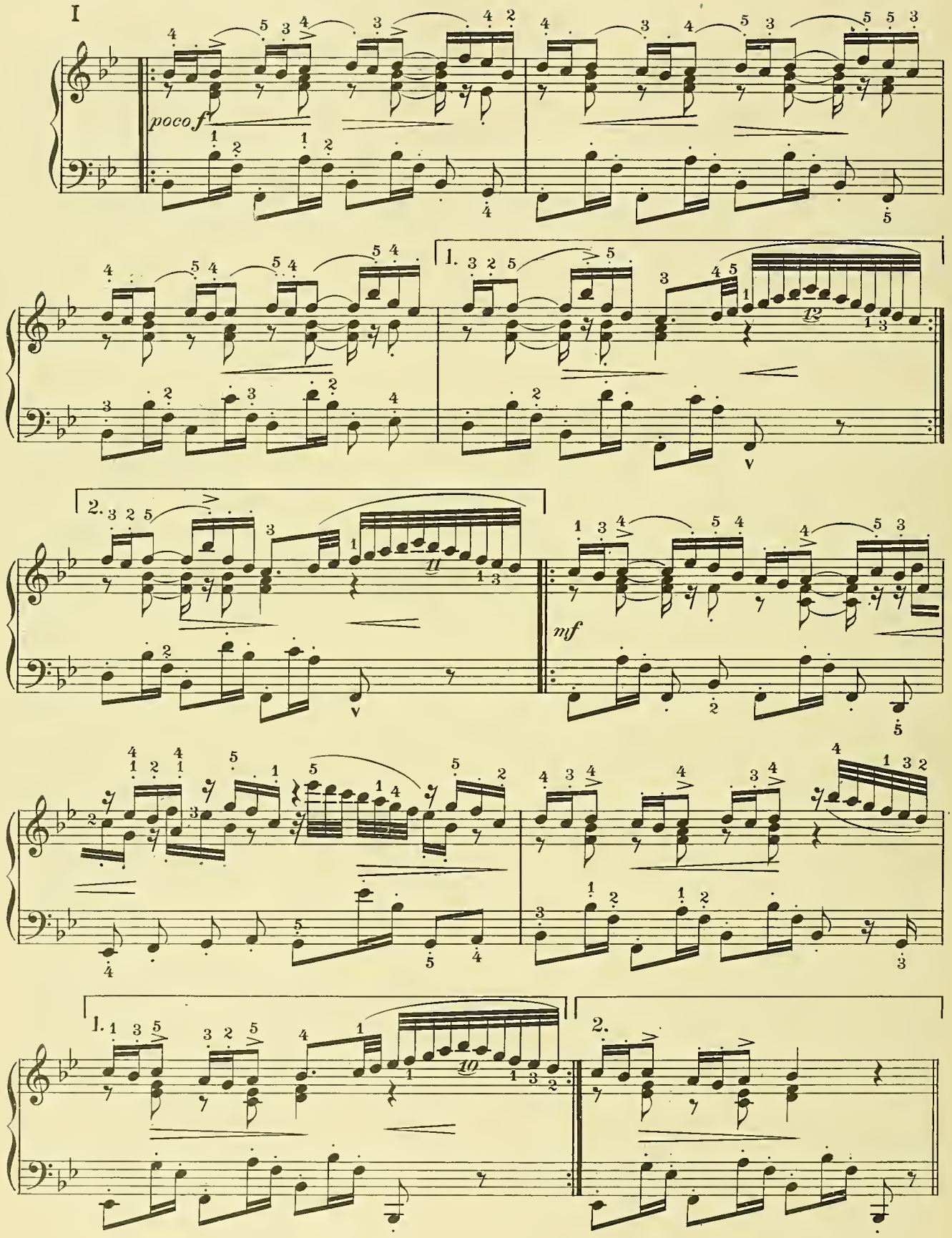
VARIATIONS

I



II. Animato

p legato

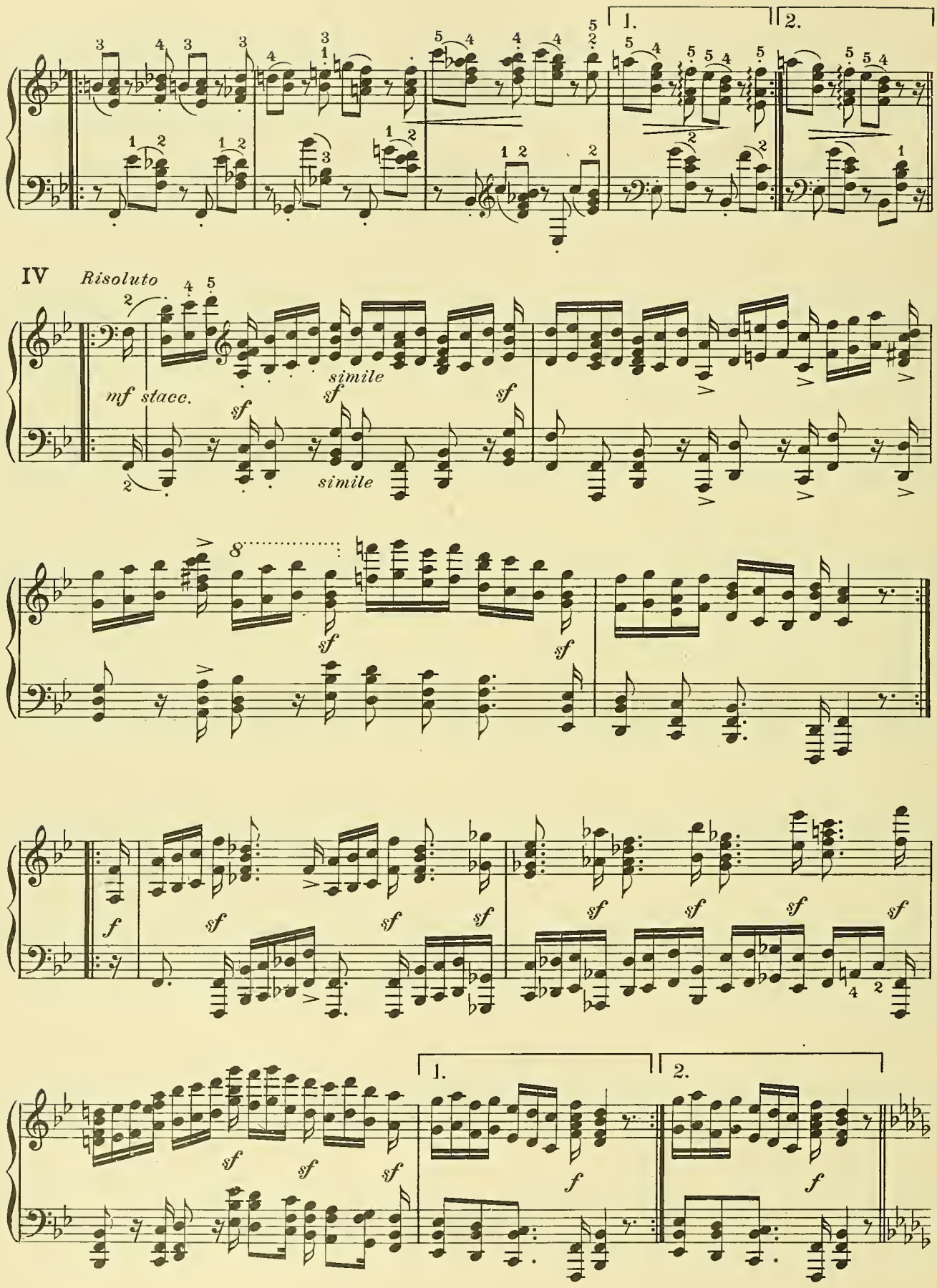
1.

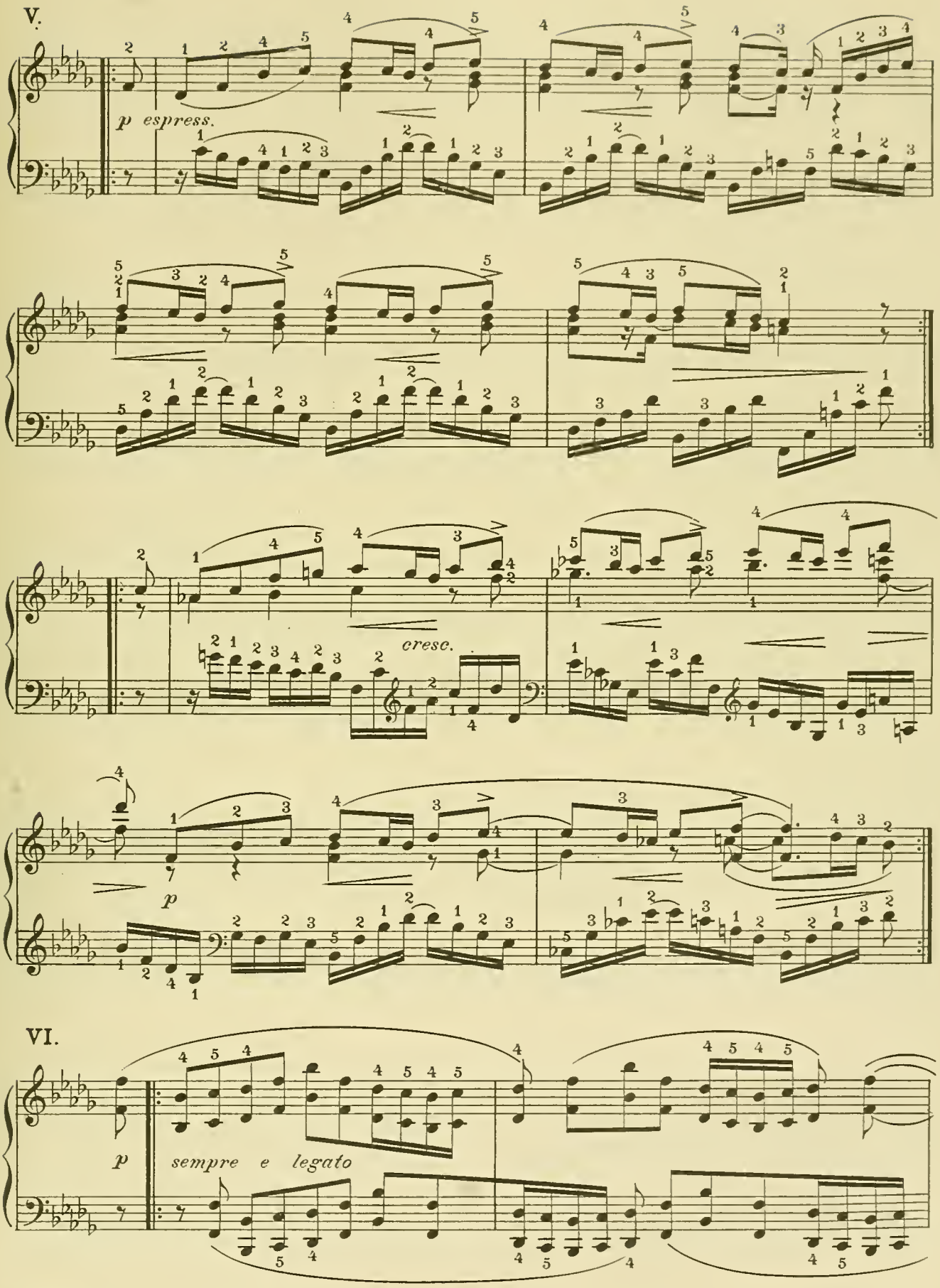
2.

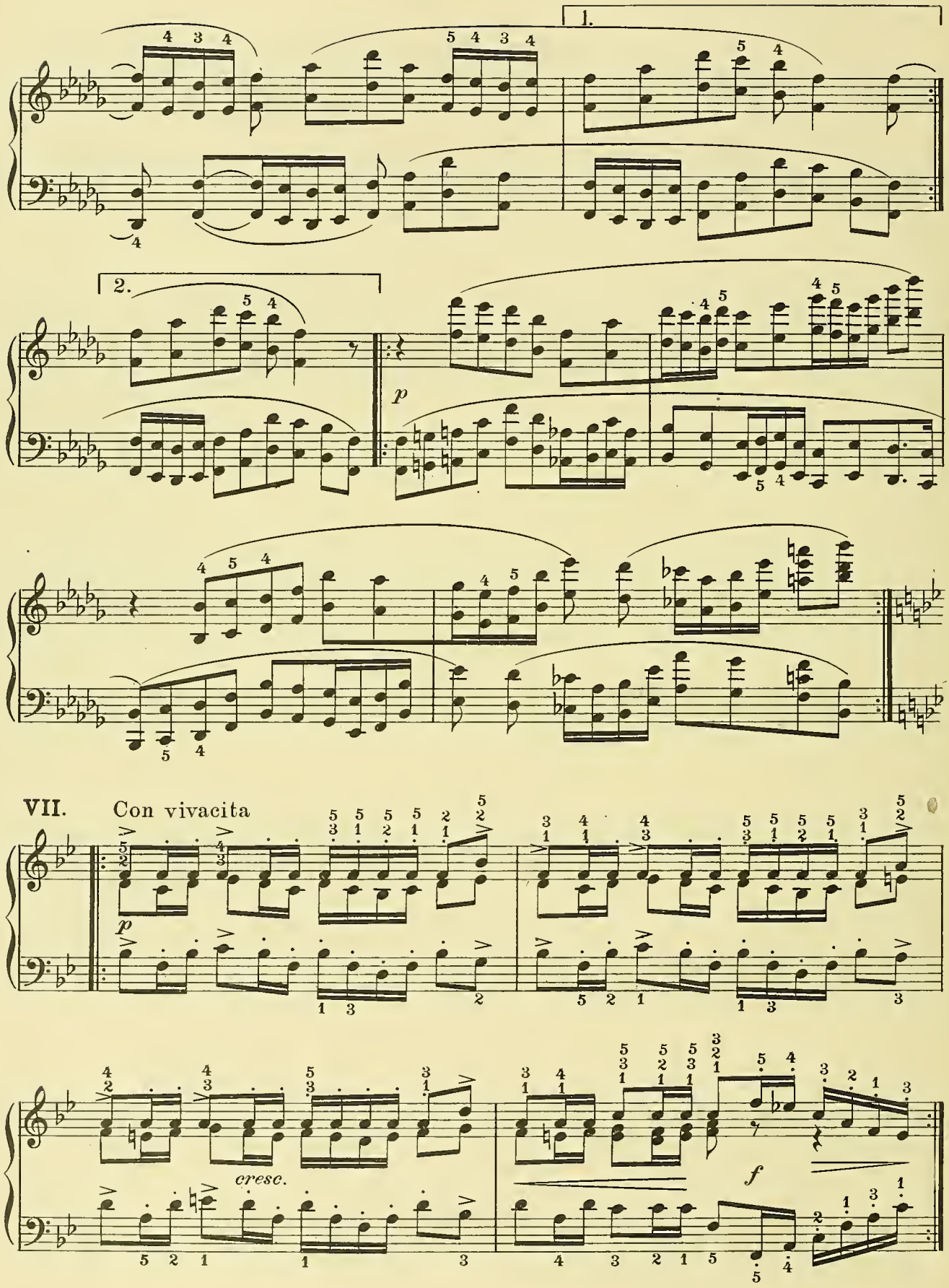
cresc.

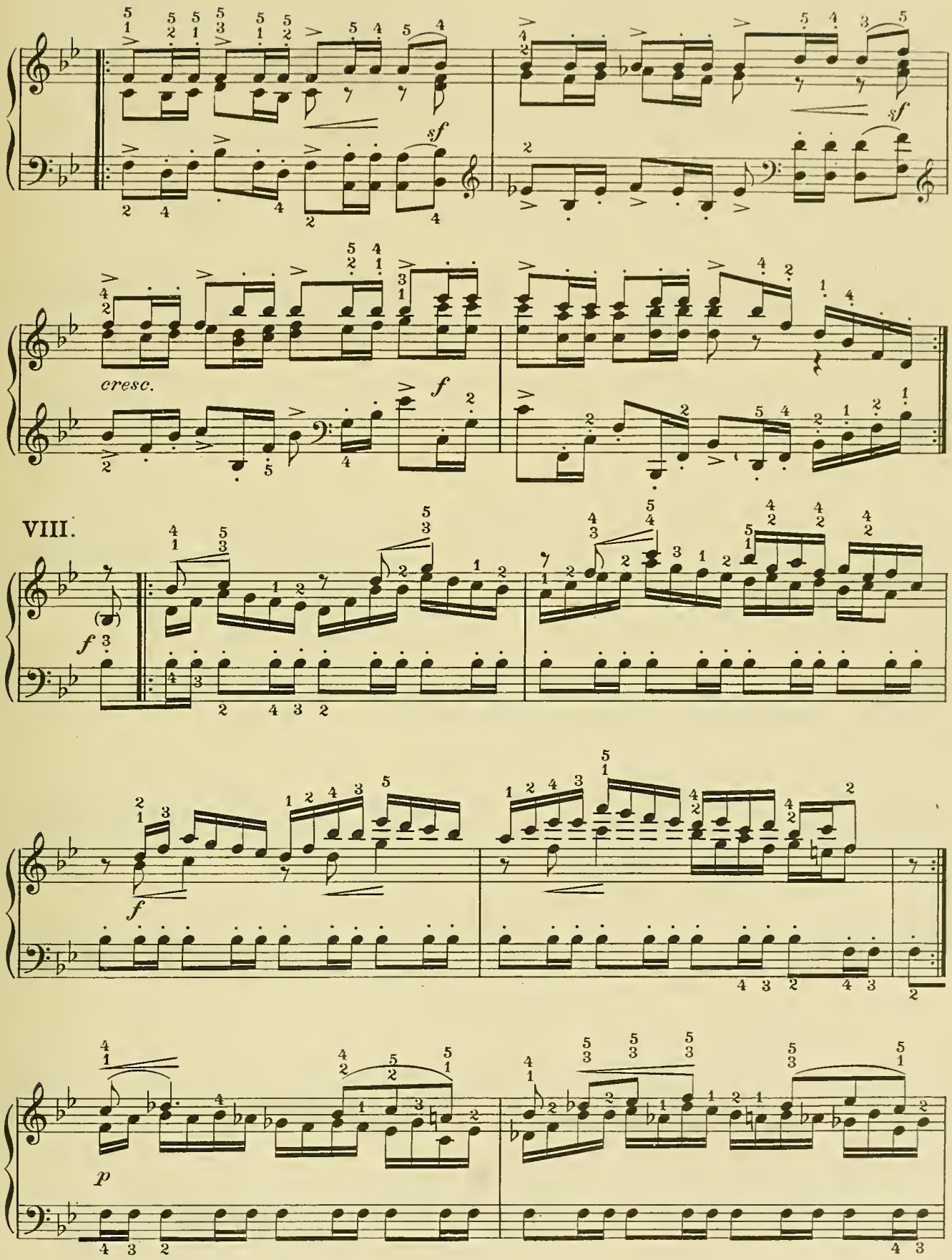
III.

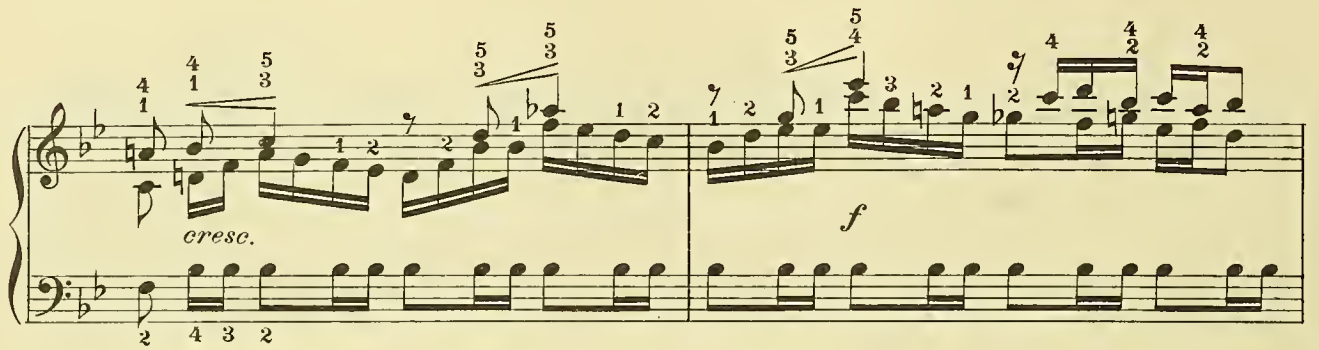
p dolce

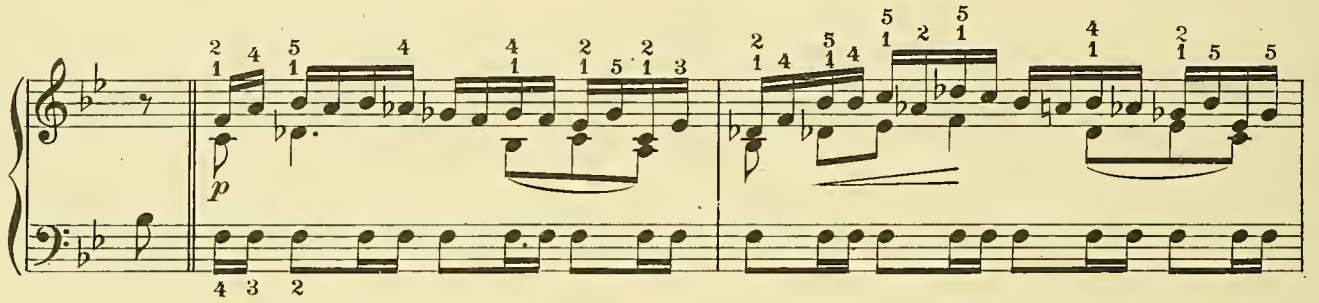

1.
2.
IV
Risoluto
mf stacc.
simile
simile
sf
f

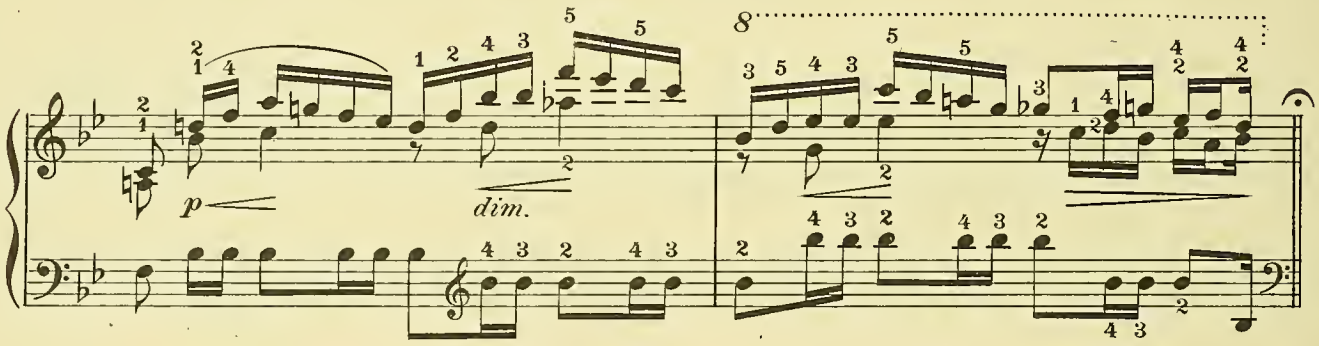

V.
p espress.
cresc.
p
VI.
p
sempre e legato


1.
2.
p
VII.
Con vivacita
p
cresc.
f

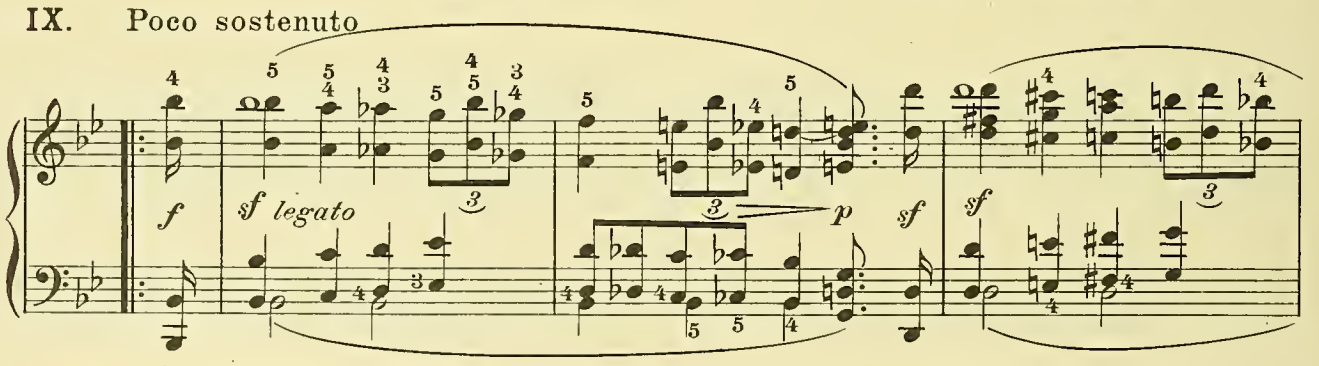

sf
sf
cresc.
f
VIII.
f
f
p

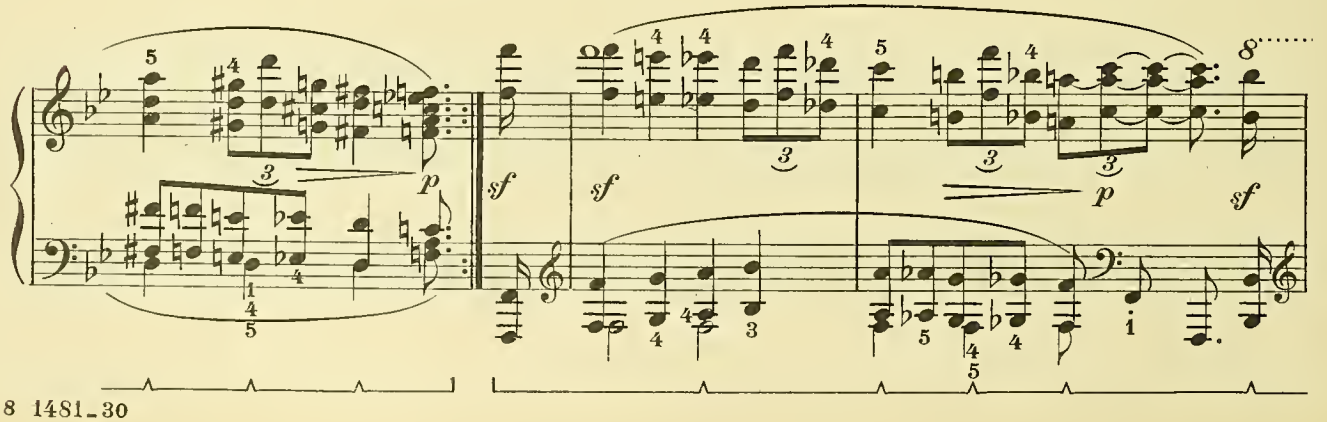


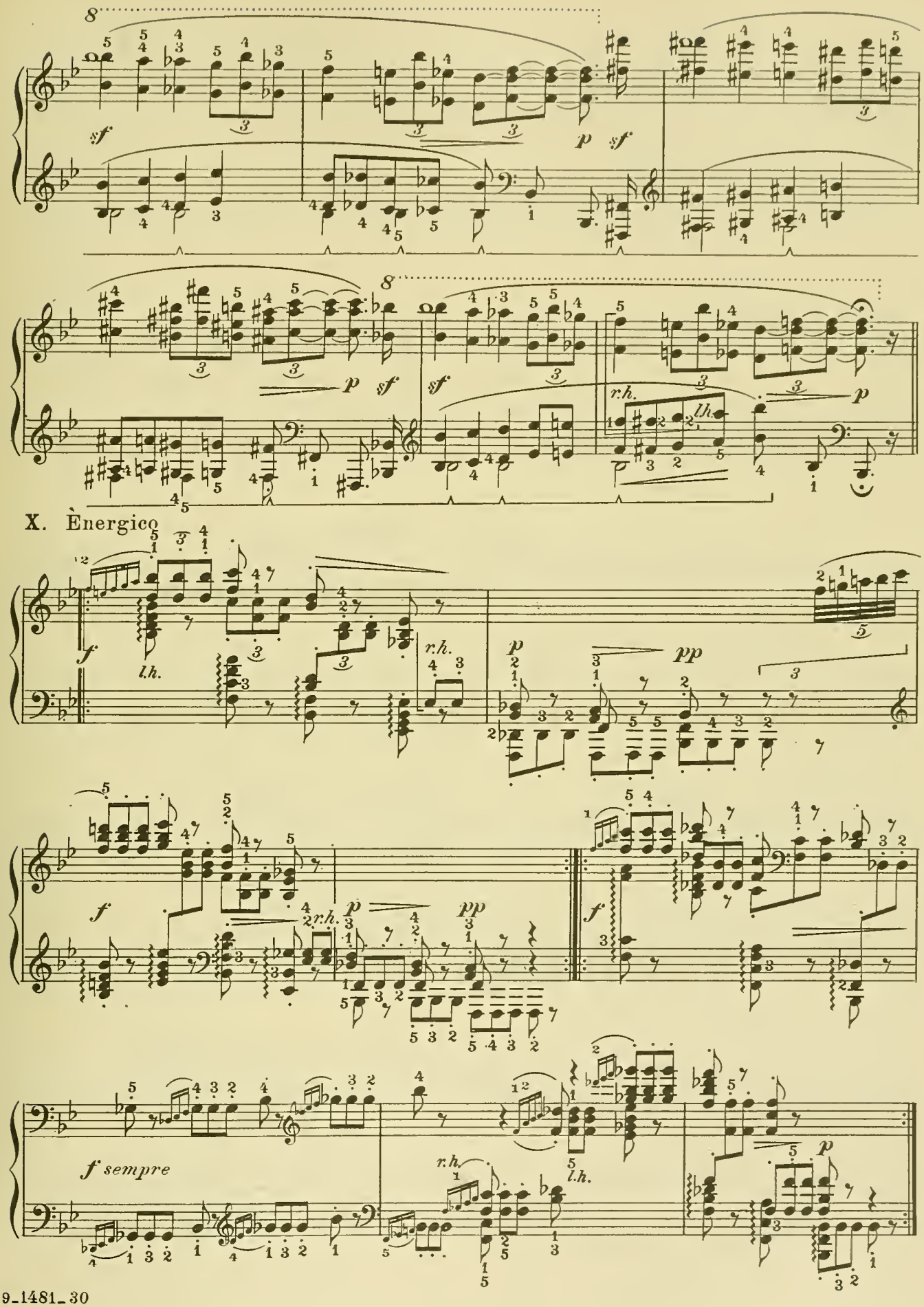




IX. Poco sostenuto






sf
p
sf
p
sf
sf
r.h.
l.h.
p
X. Energico
f
l.h.
r.h.
p
pp
f
r.h.
p
pp
f
f sempre
r.h.
l.h.
p

XI.

p dolce

simile

cresc.

p dolce

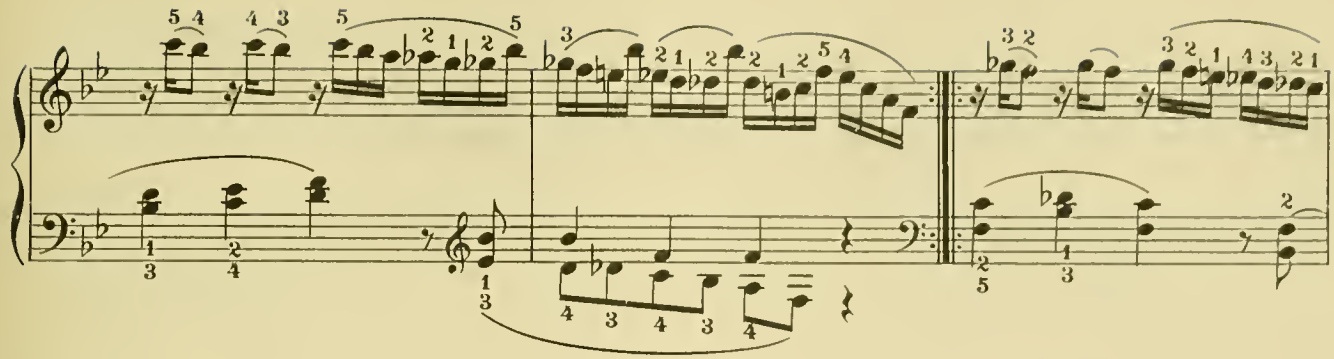
1.

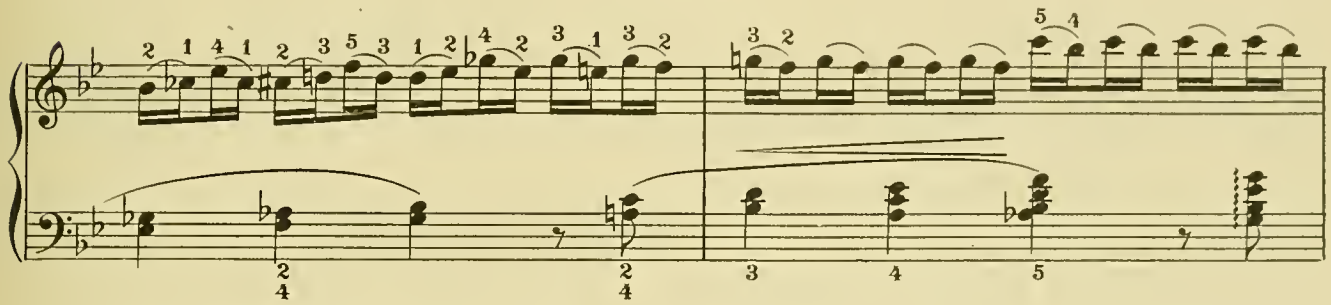
2.

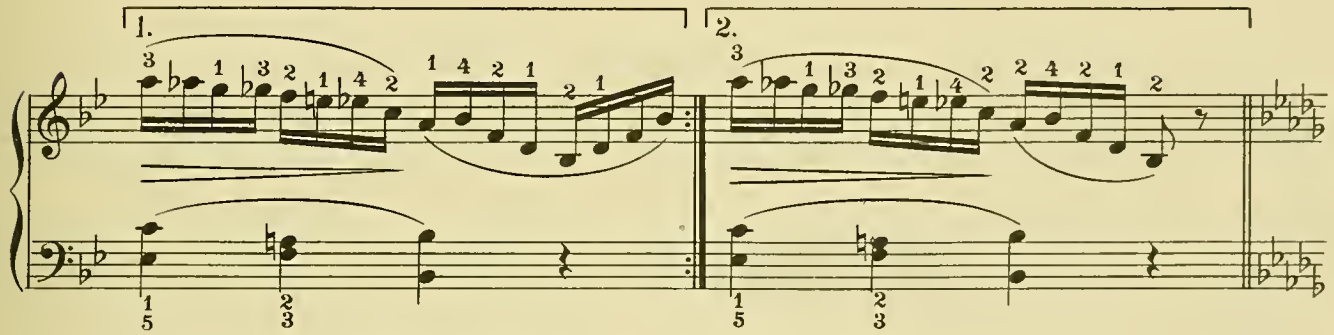
XII.

pp soave

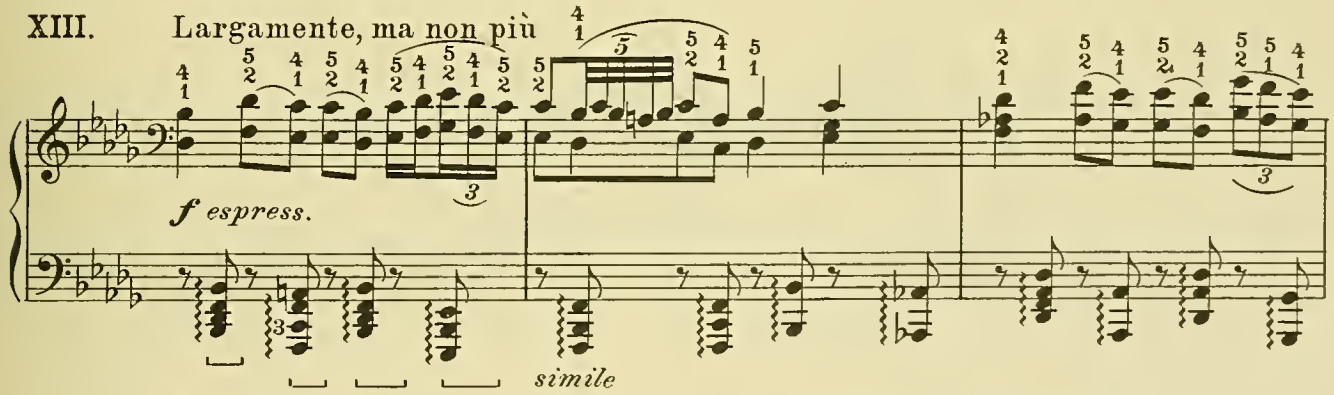
senza pedale

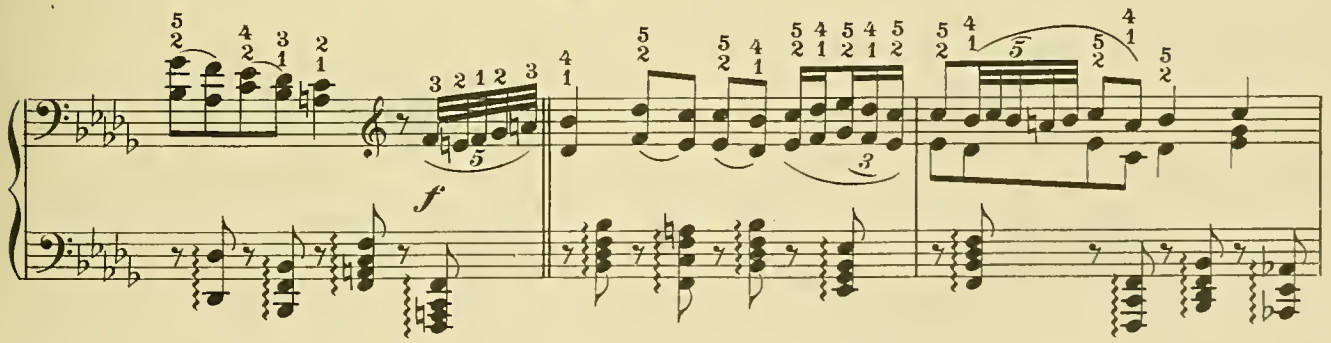


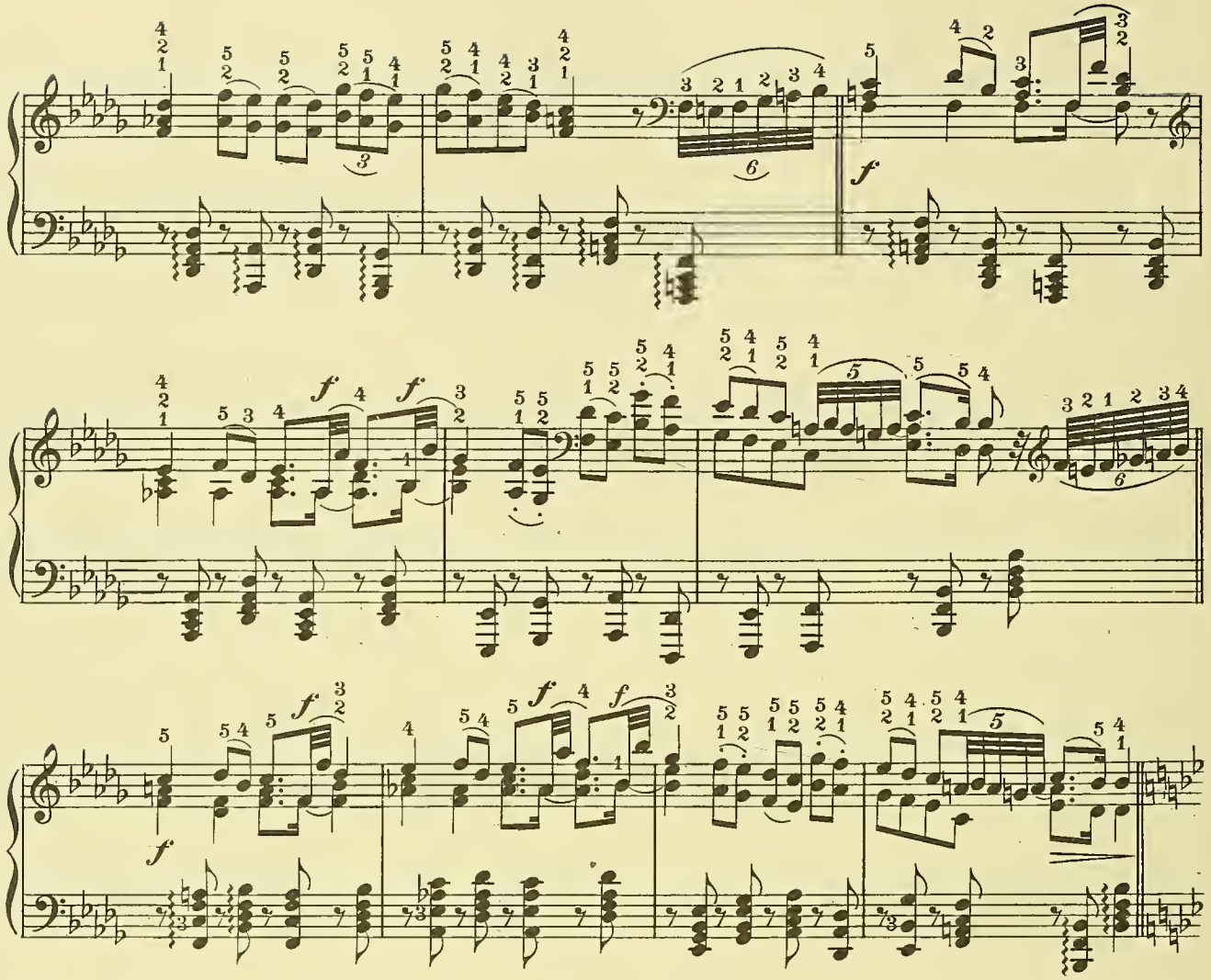




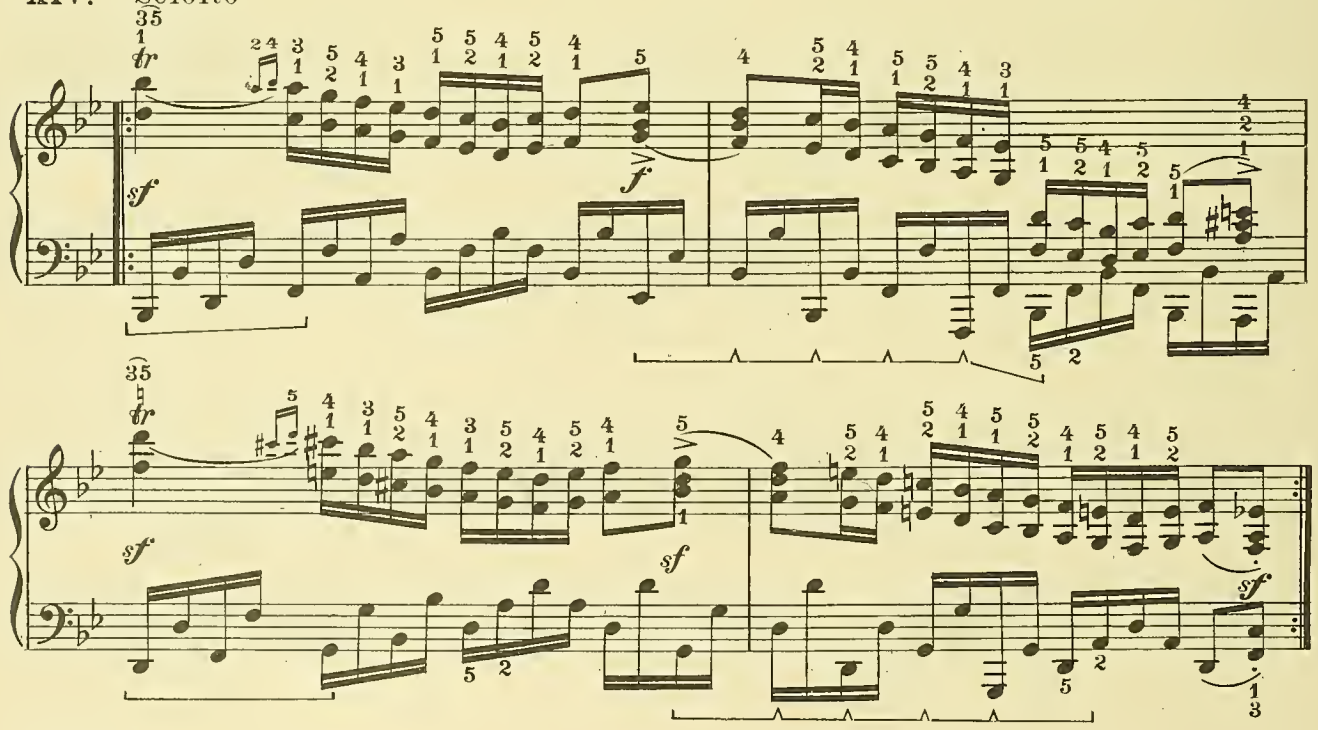
XIII. Largamente, ma non più

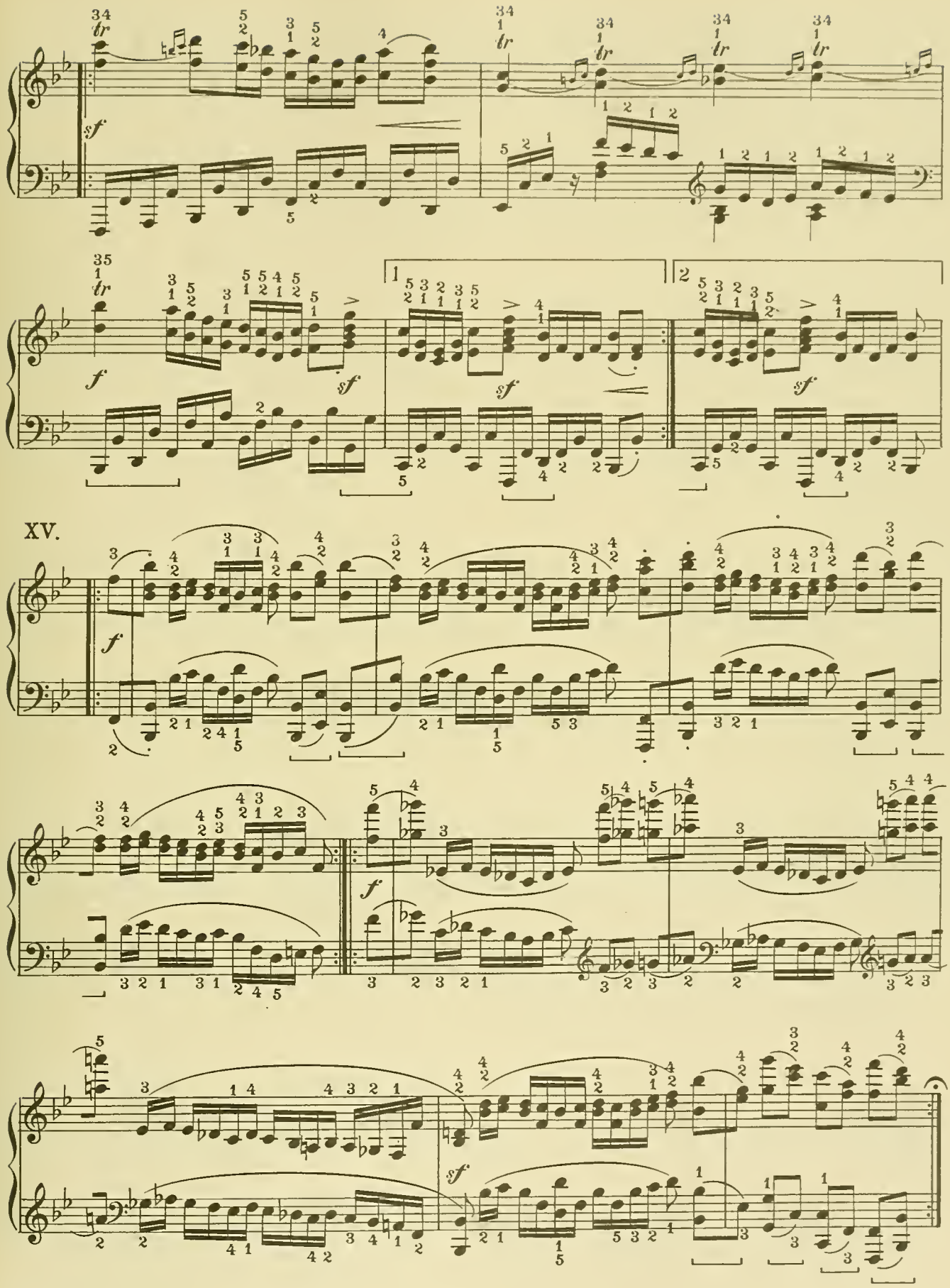






XIV. Sciolto




tr
sf
f
1
2
XV.

XVI.

2da volta

p

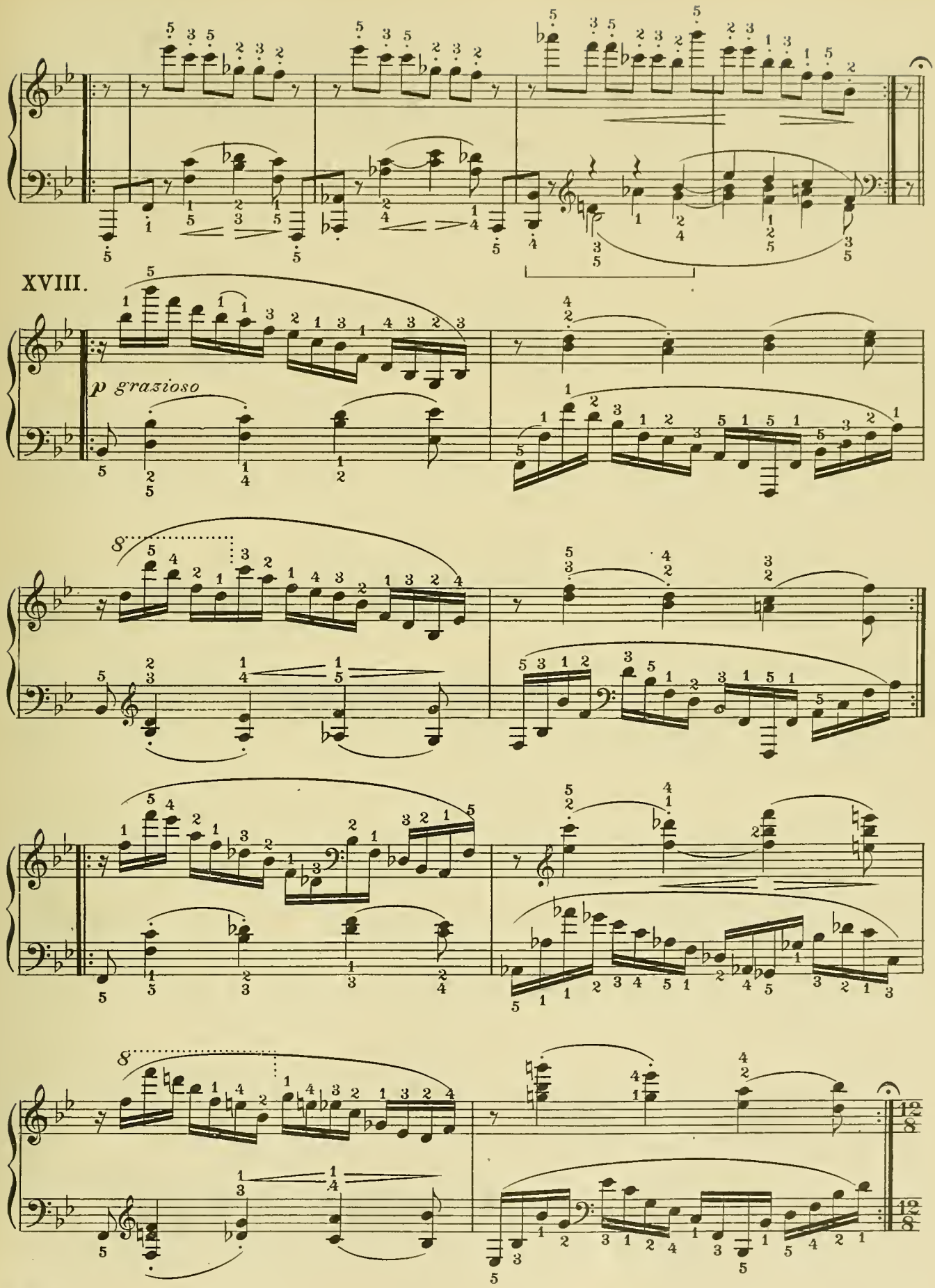
ma marcato

p

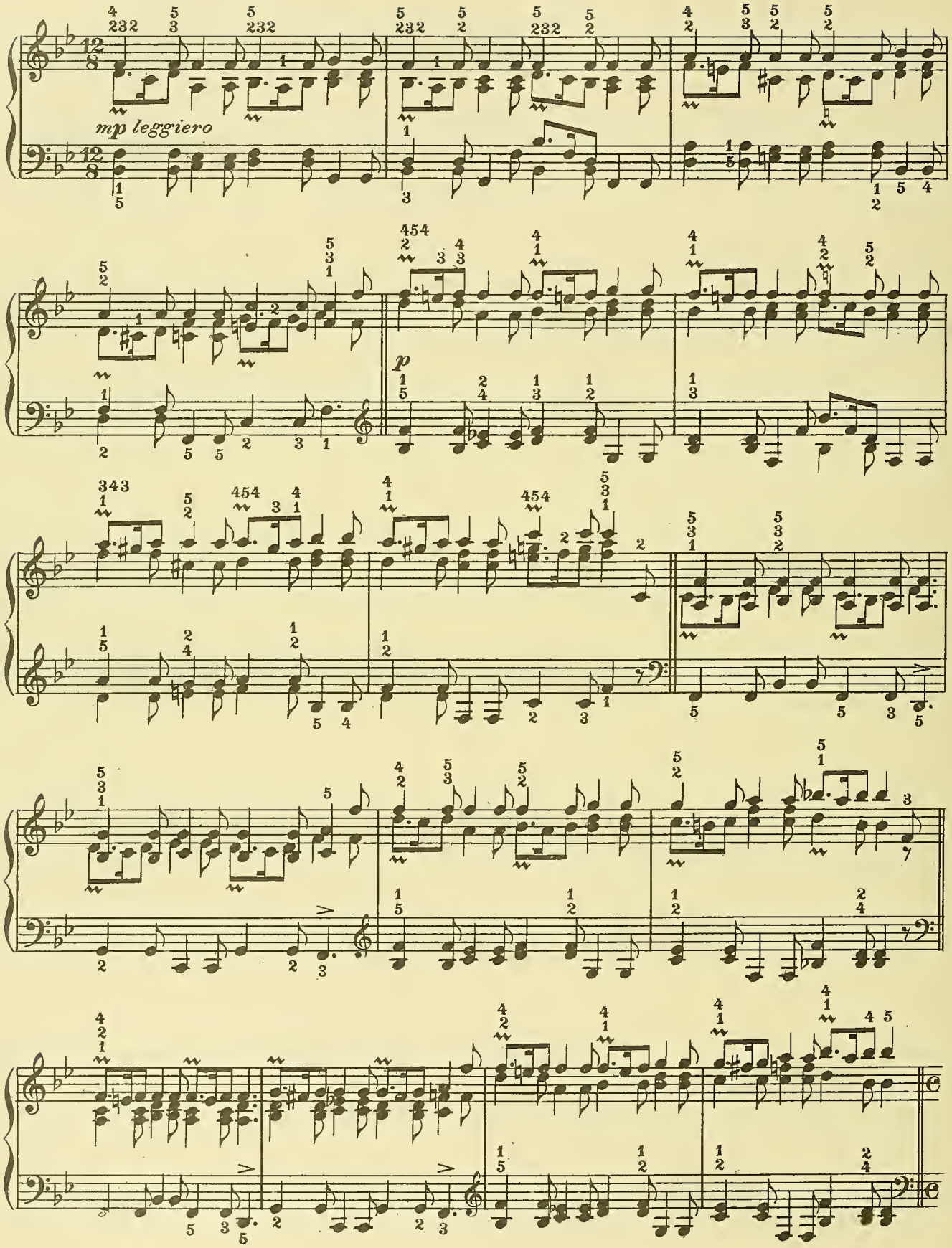
p

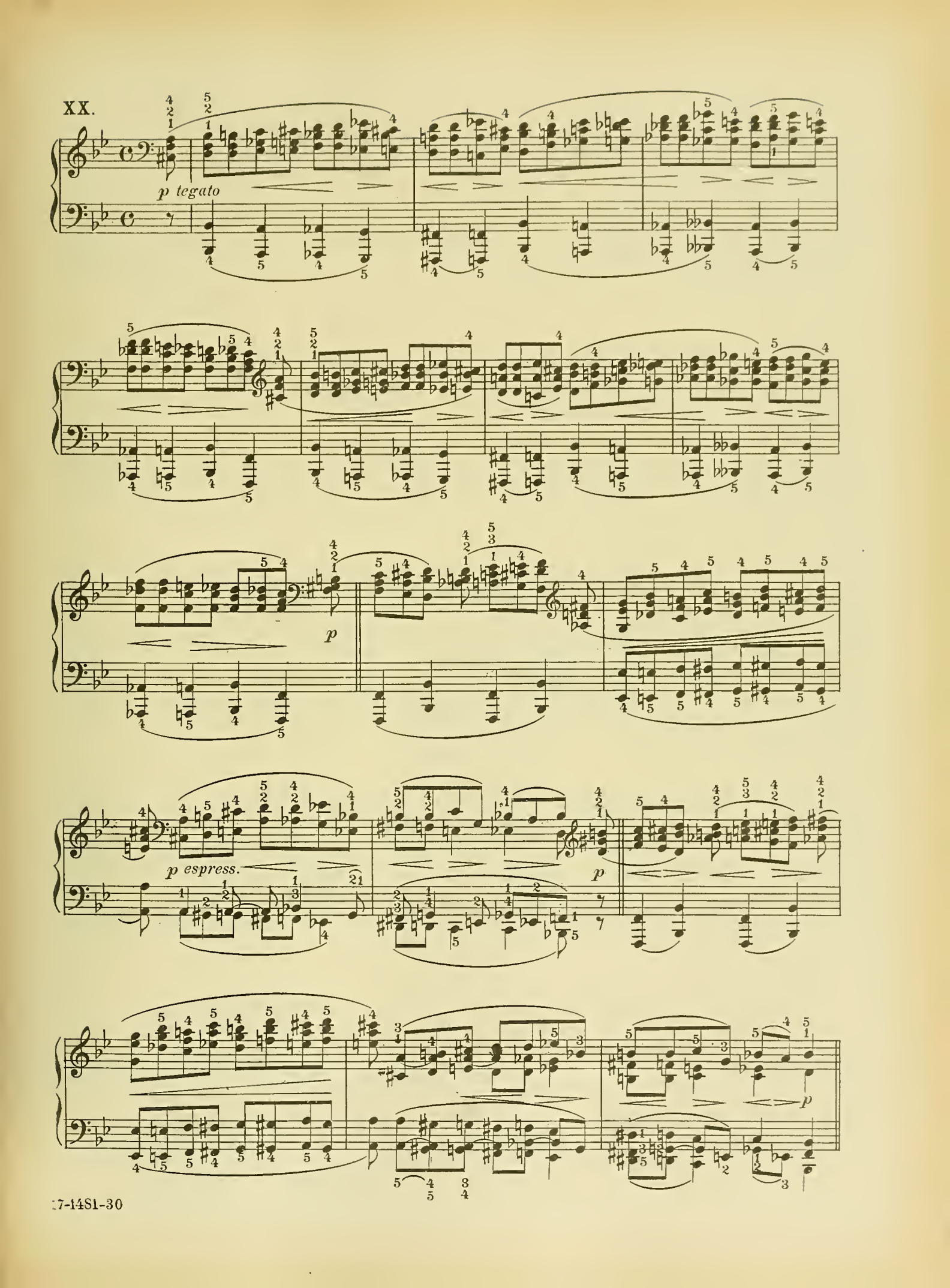
XVII. Più mosso

p


XVIII.
p grazioso

XIX. Vivace




XX.
p tegato
p
p espress.
p
p

XXI.

p dolce

espress.

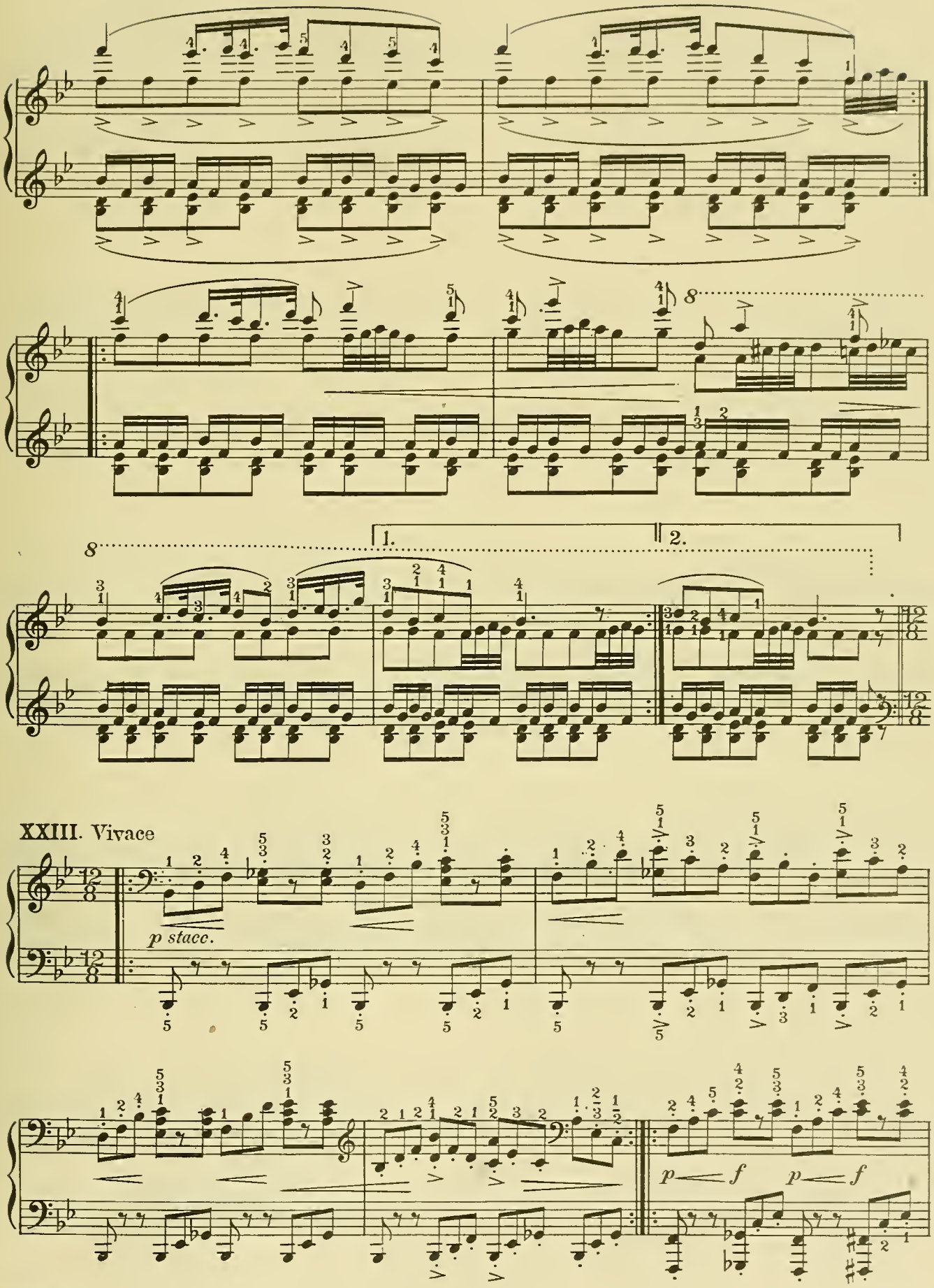
1.

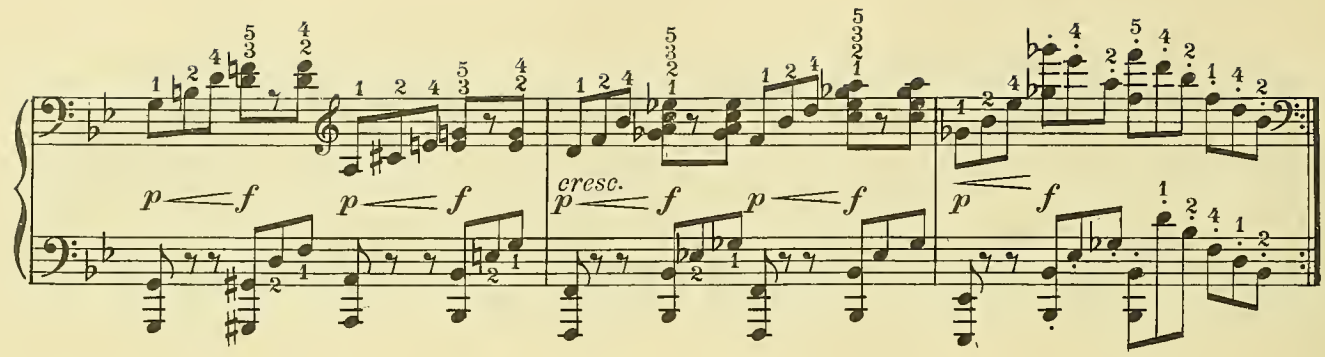
2.

XXII. Con moto

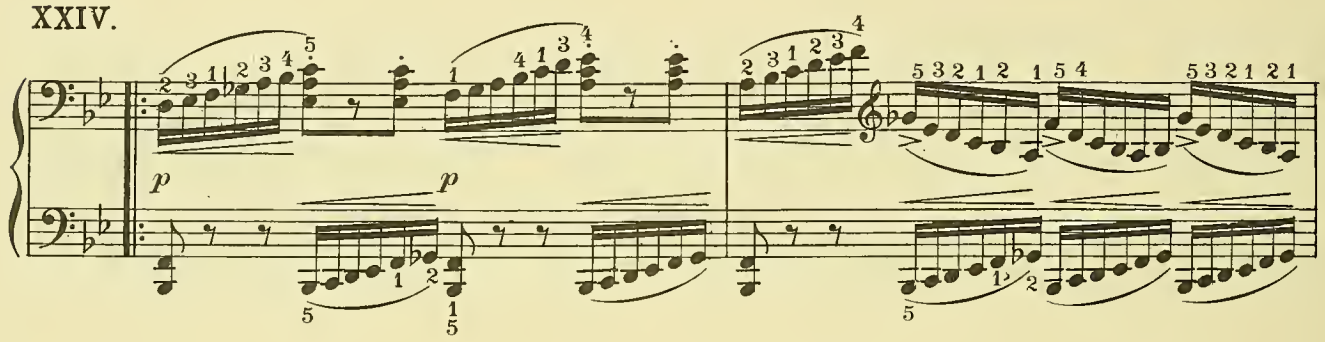
p

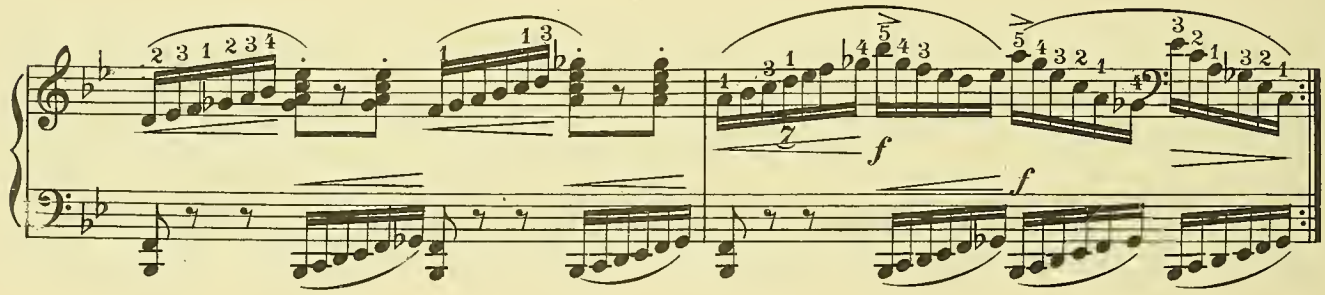
Ped.

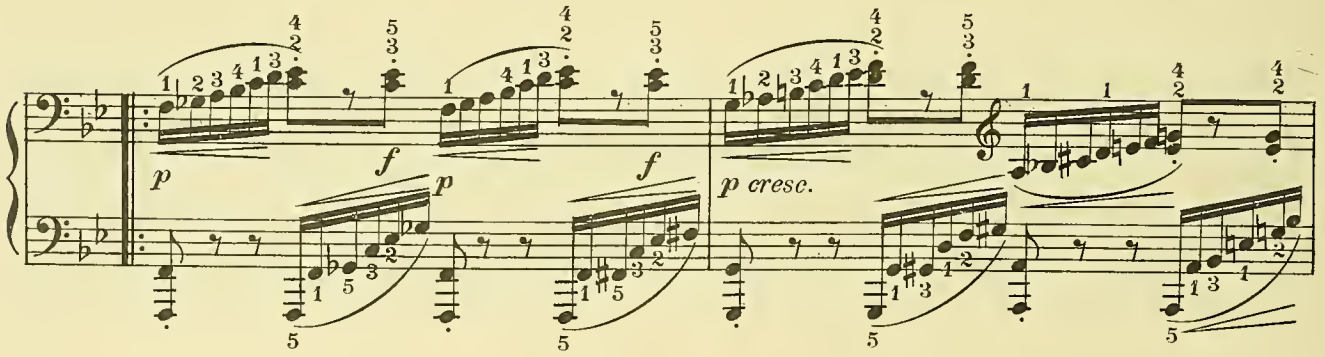

8
1.
2.
XXIII. Vivace
p stacc.
p
f
p
f

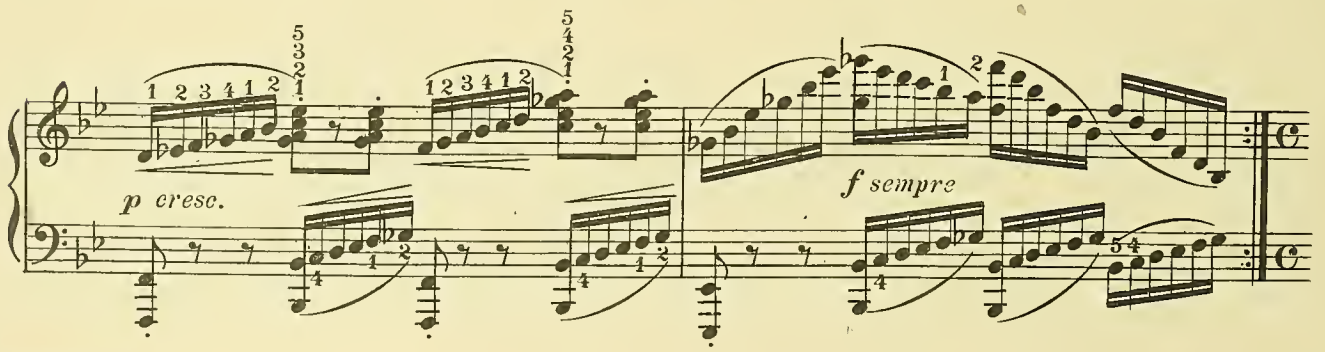


XXIV.









XXV. Spiritoso

ff

1.

2.

sempre ff

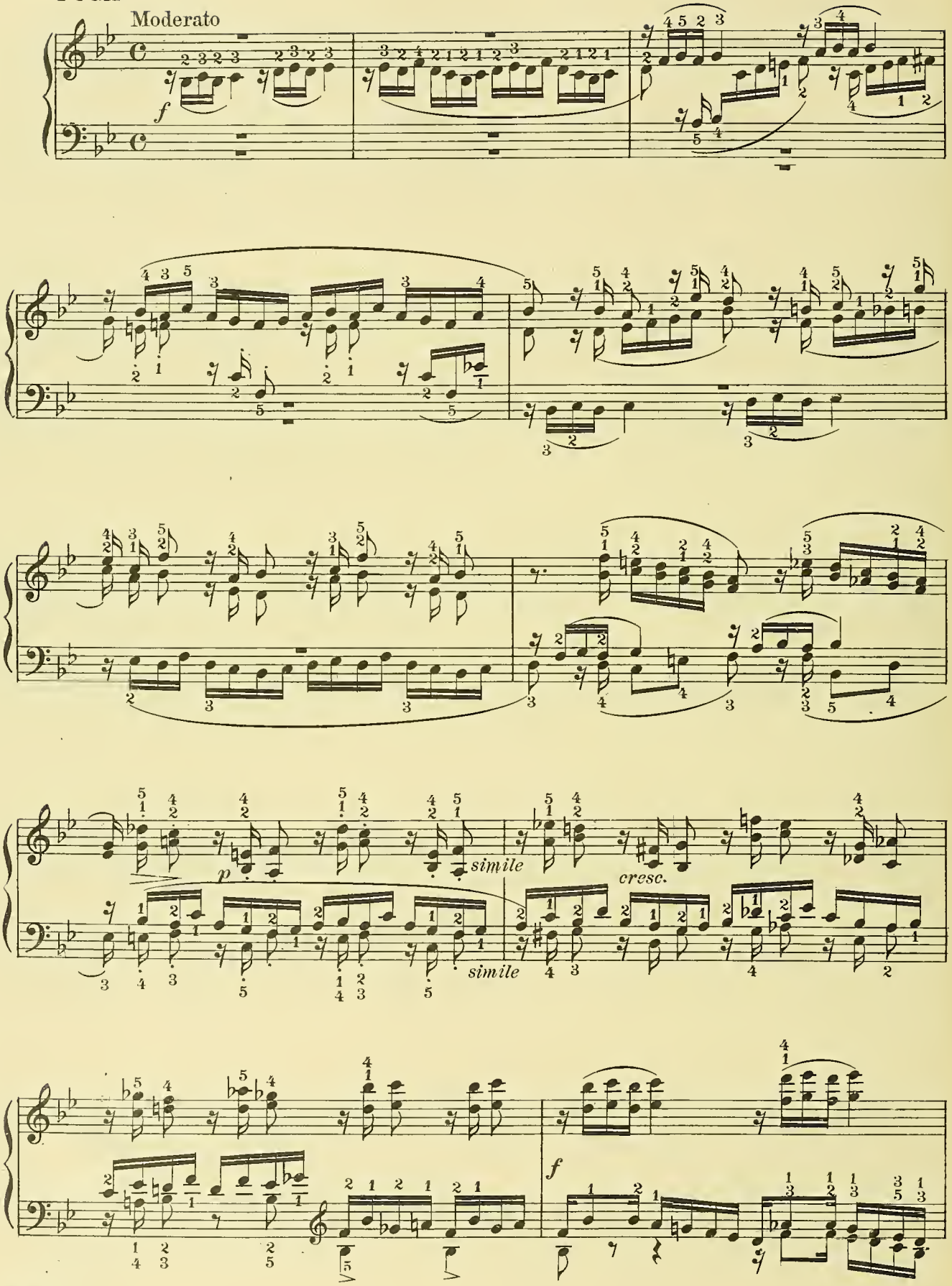
1.

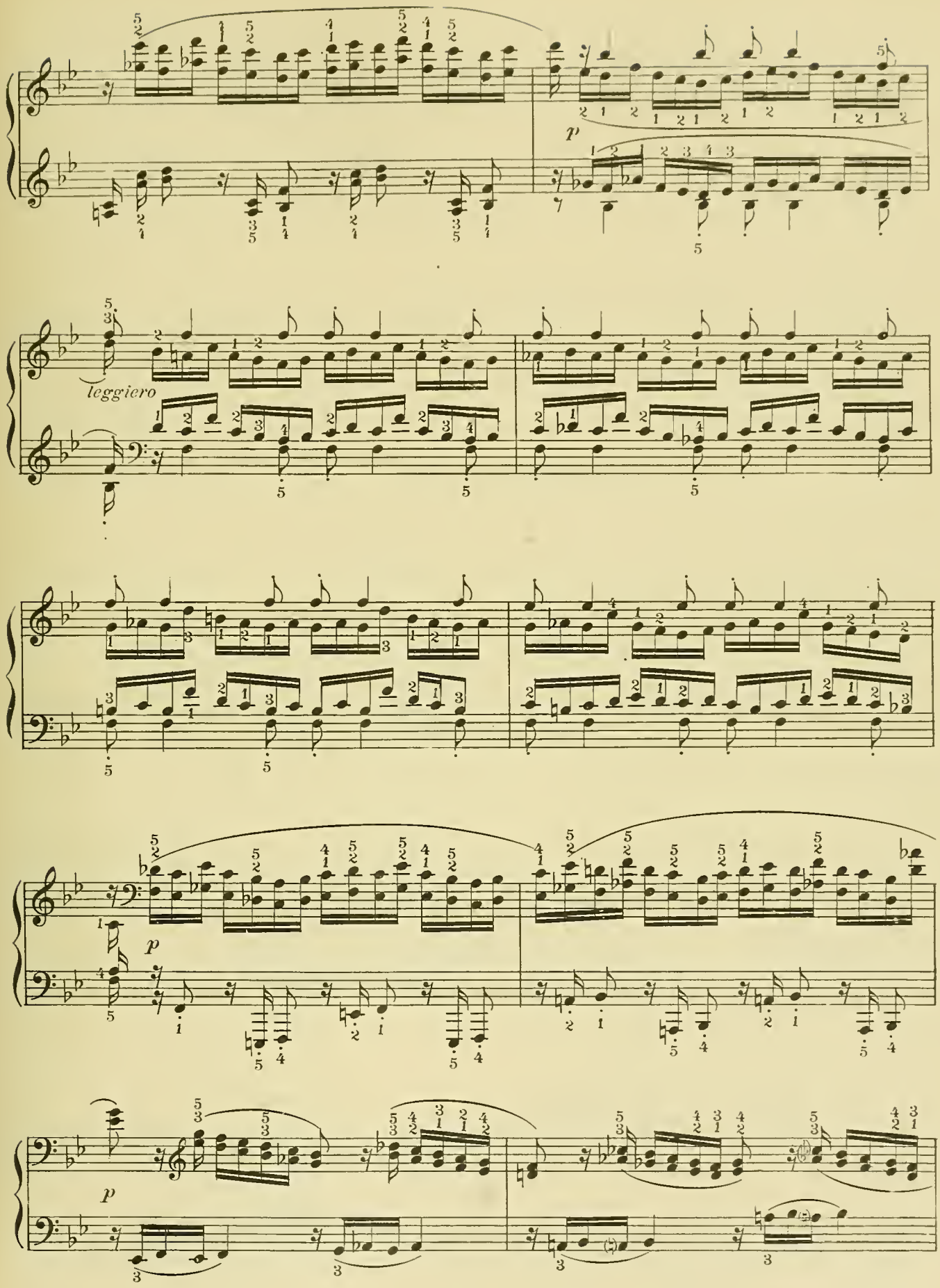
2.

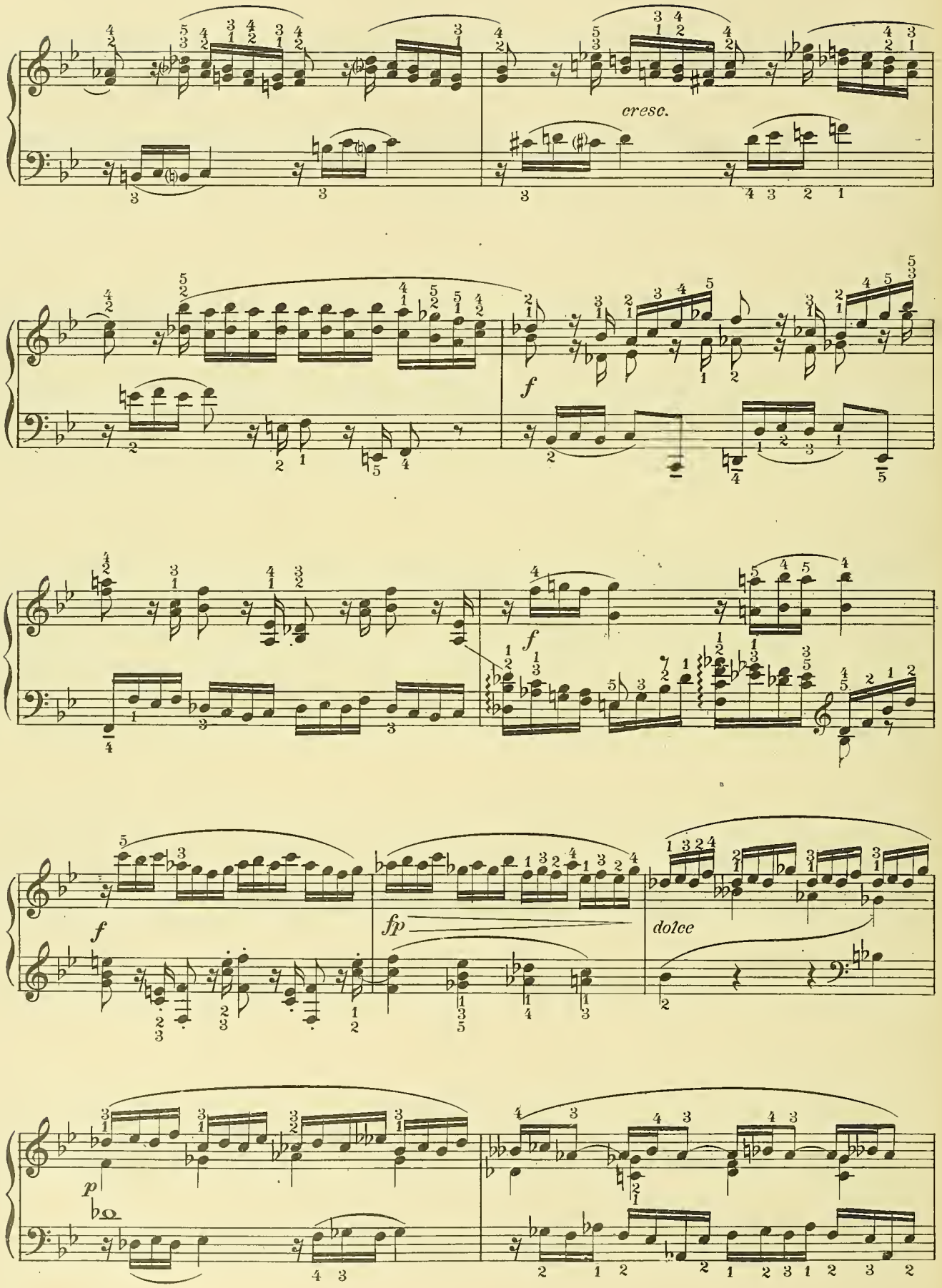
un poco allarg.

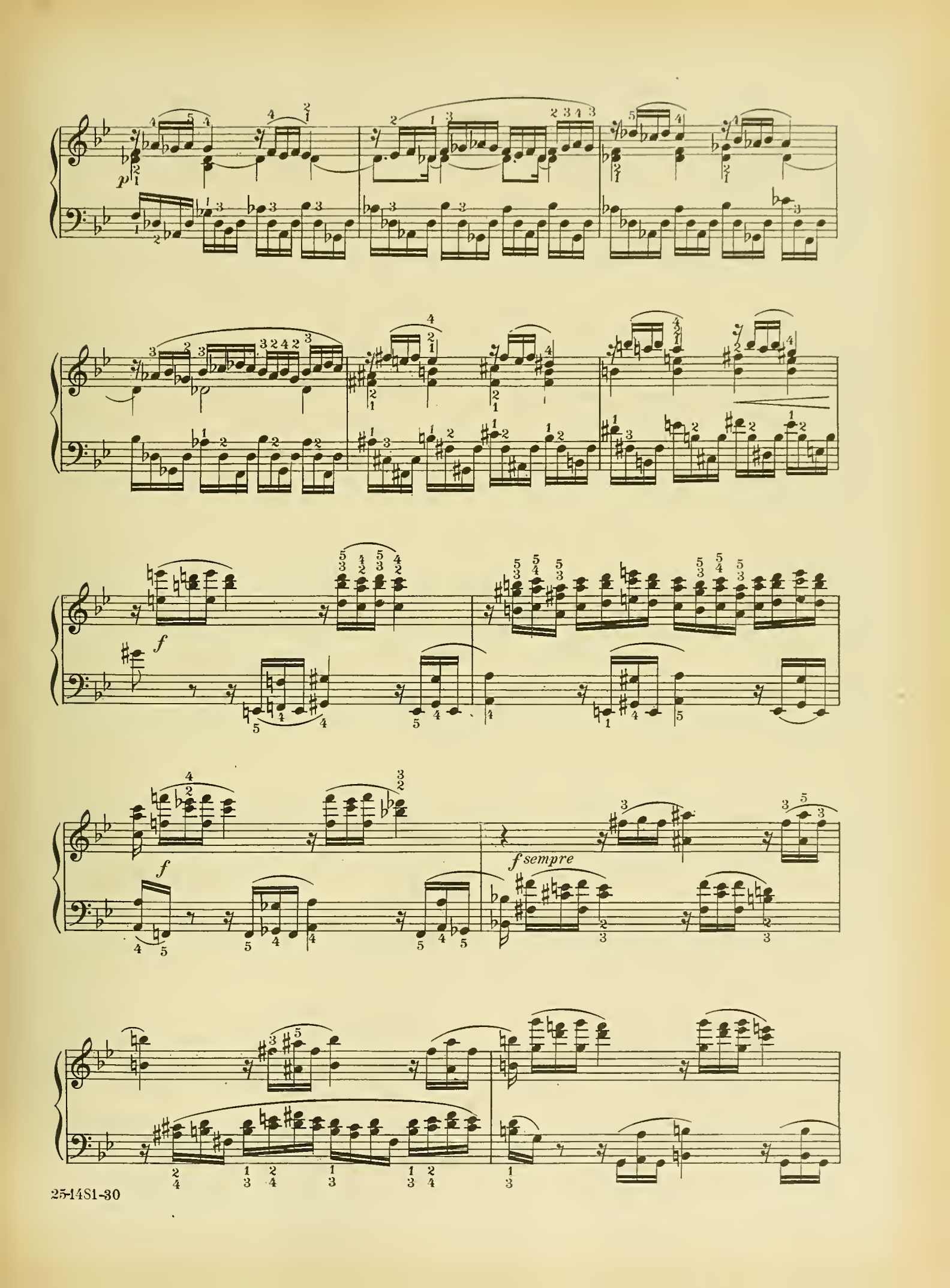
segue la Fuga

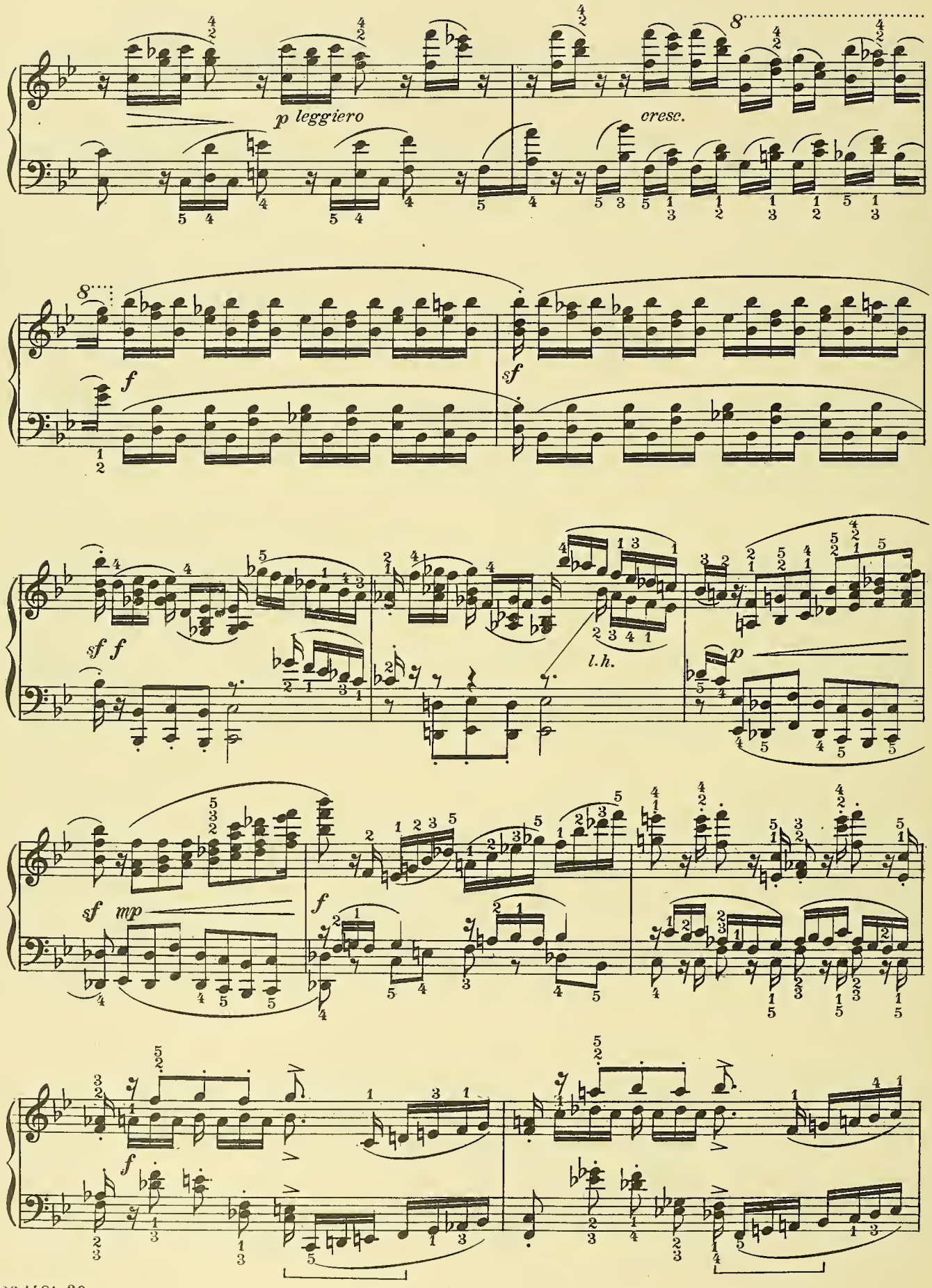
FUGA

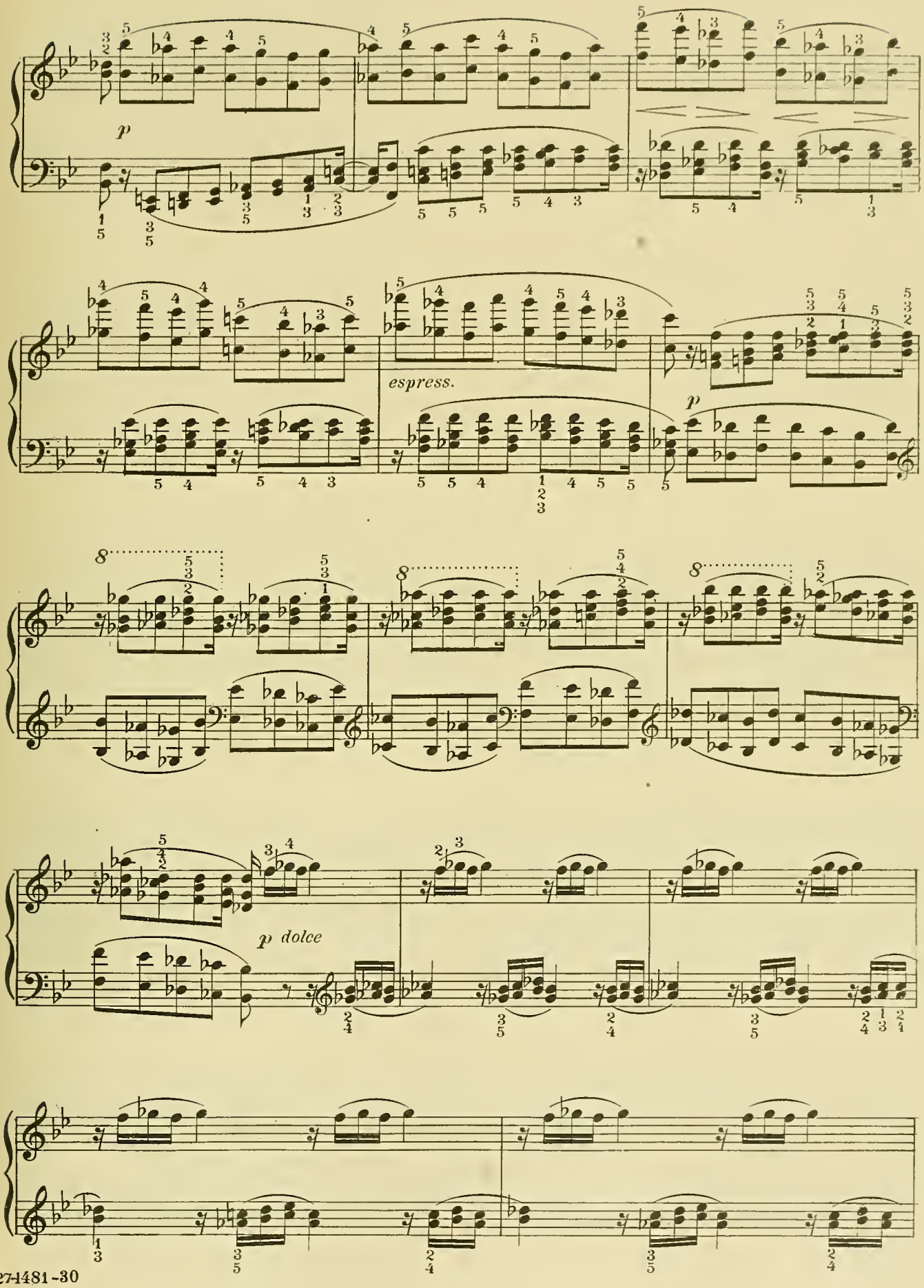


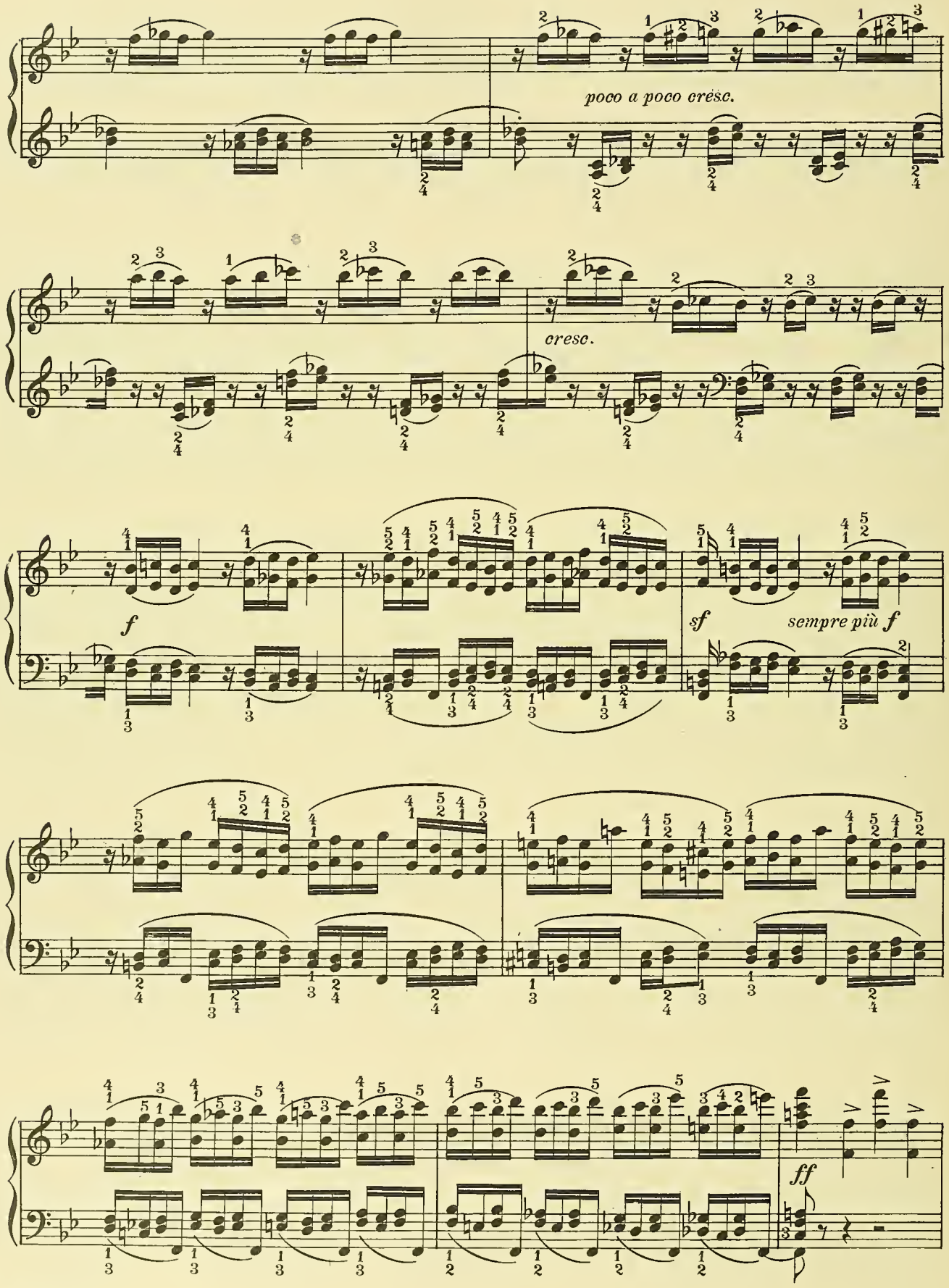

p
leggiero
p
p

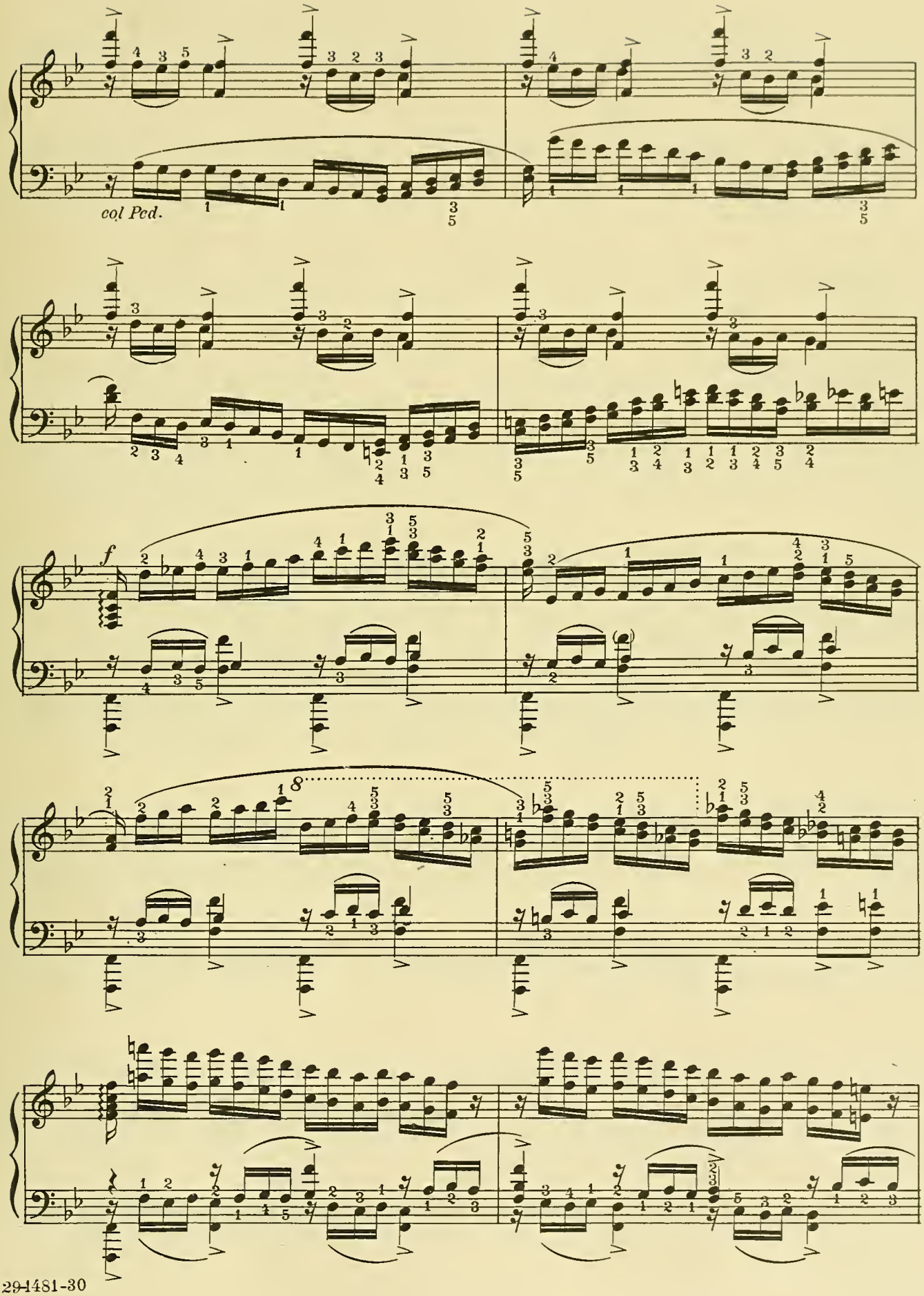

cresc.
f
f
f
fp
dolce
p

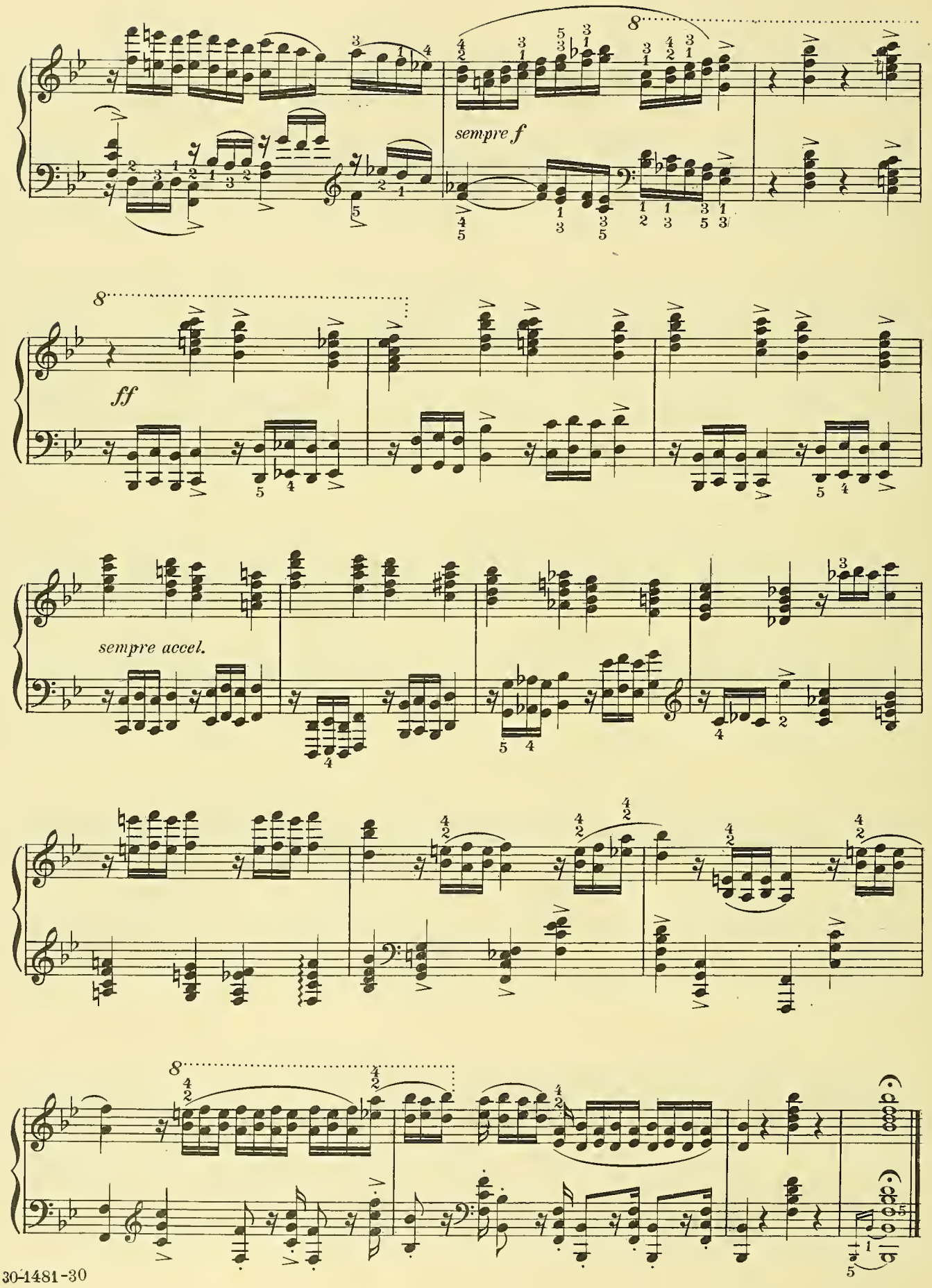

p
f
f
f sempre


p leggiero
cresc.
f
sf
sf f
l.h.
p
sf mp
f
f


p
espress.
p
p dolce


poco a poco cresc.
cresc.
f
sf
sempre più f
ff


col Ped.
f

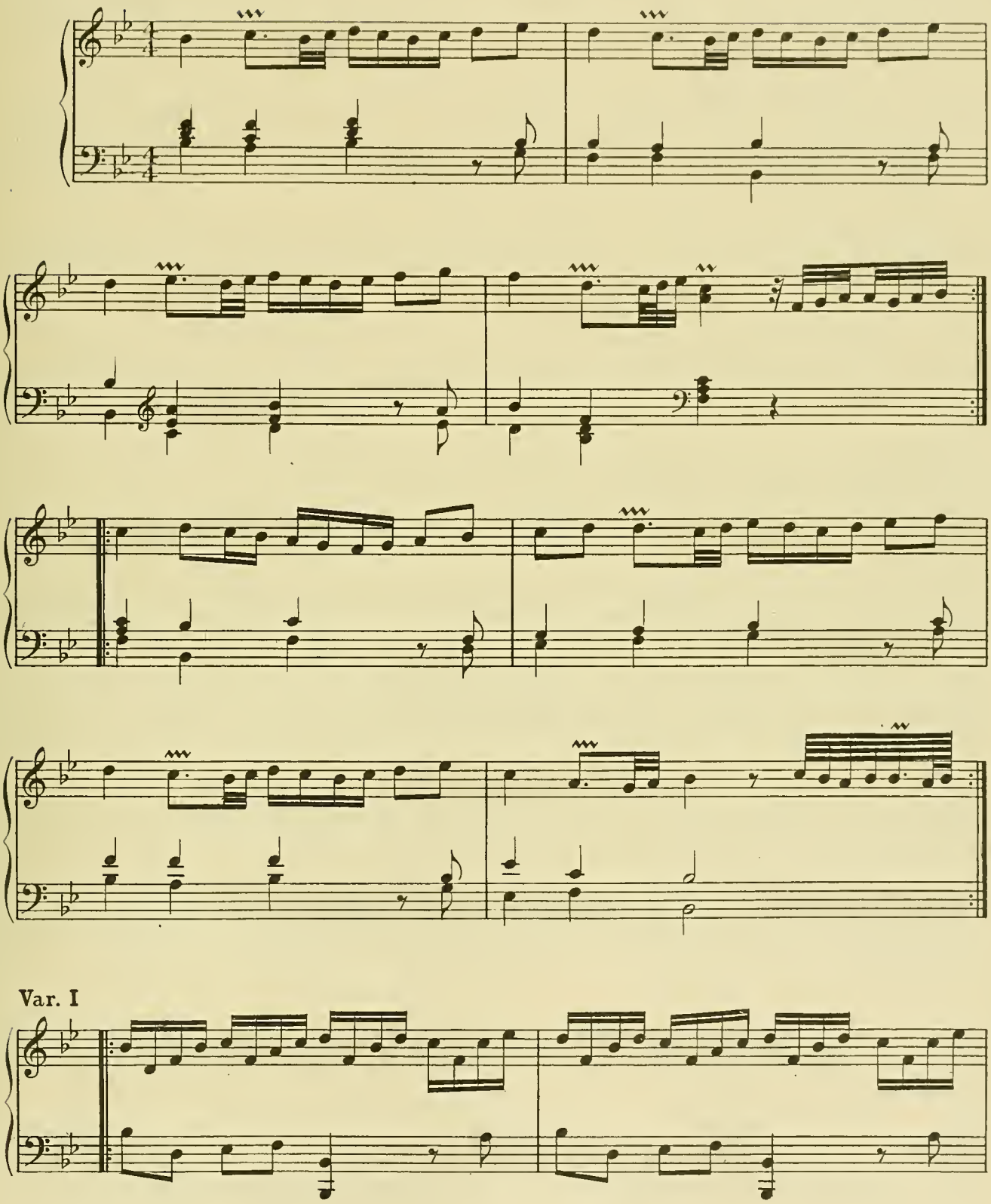

sempre f
ff
sempre accel.

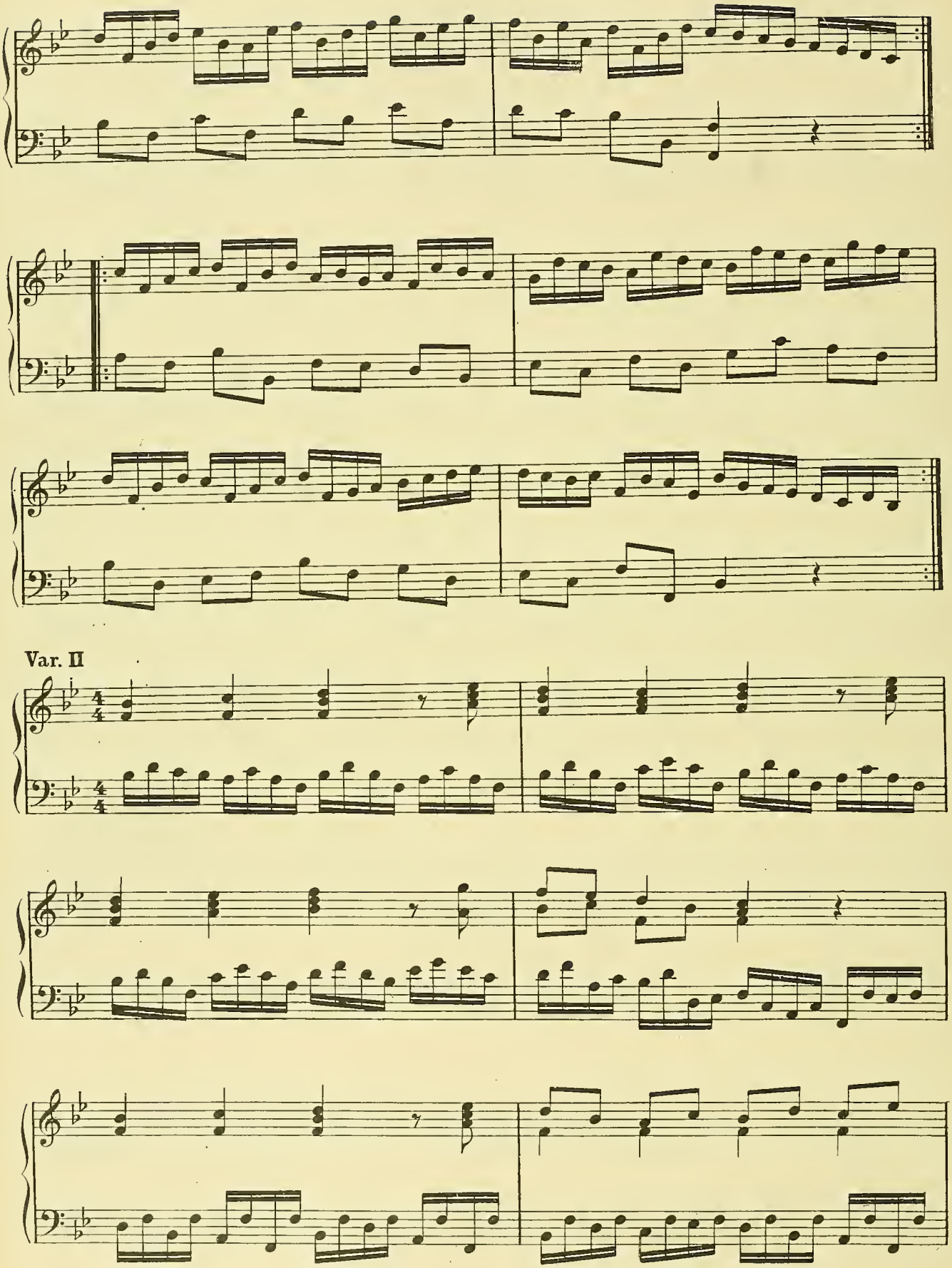
AIR WITH VARIATIONS

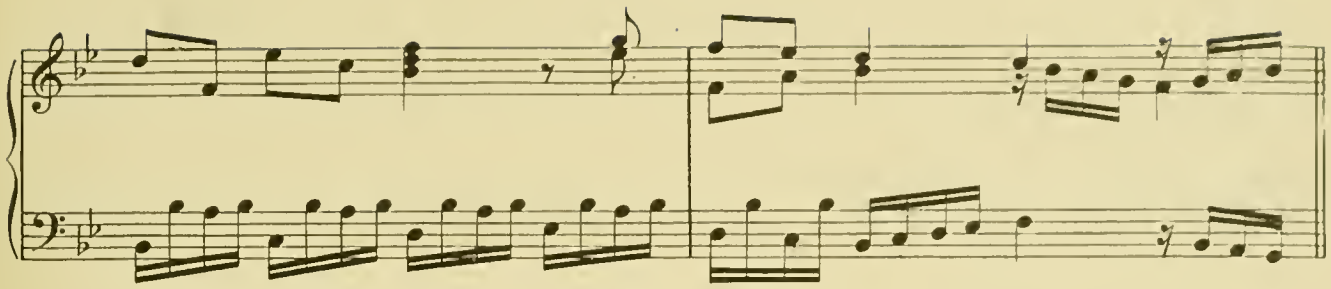
(From "Trois Leçons," No. I)

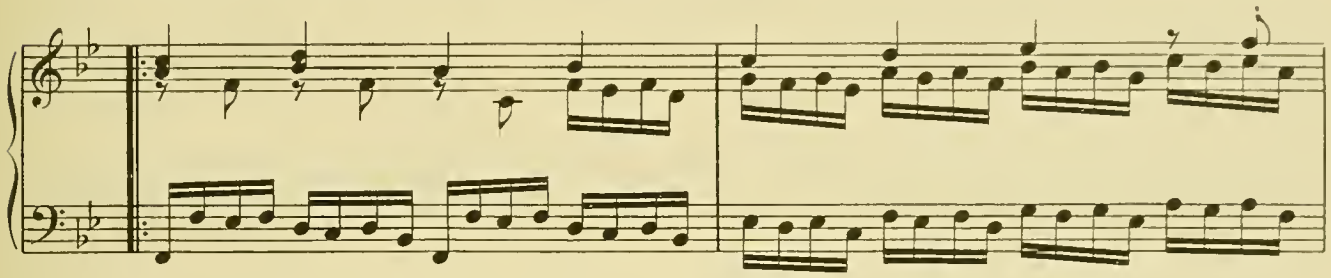
HANDEL

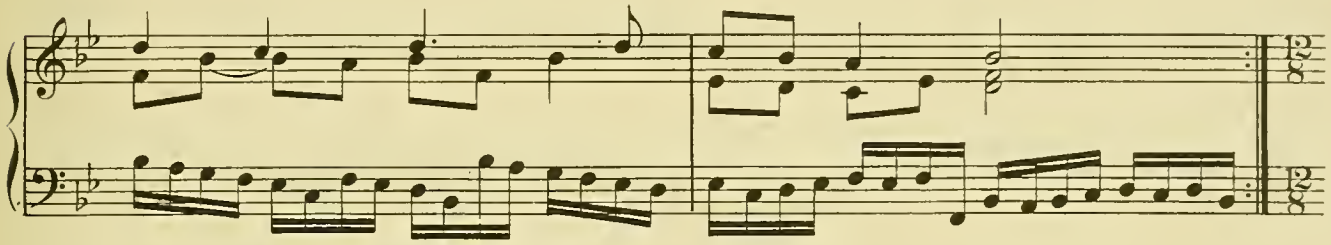
Air



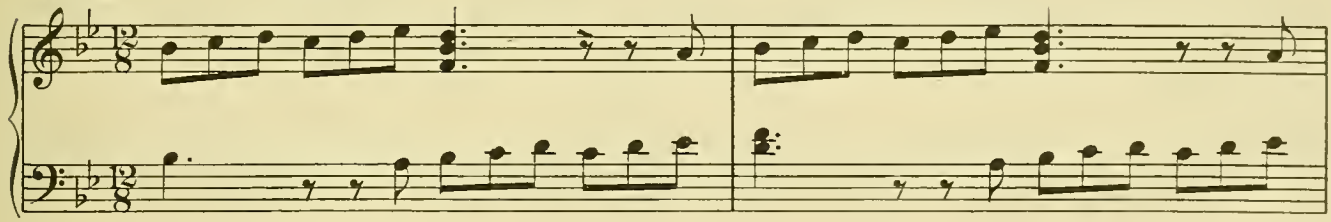

Var. II

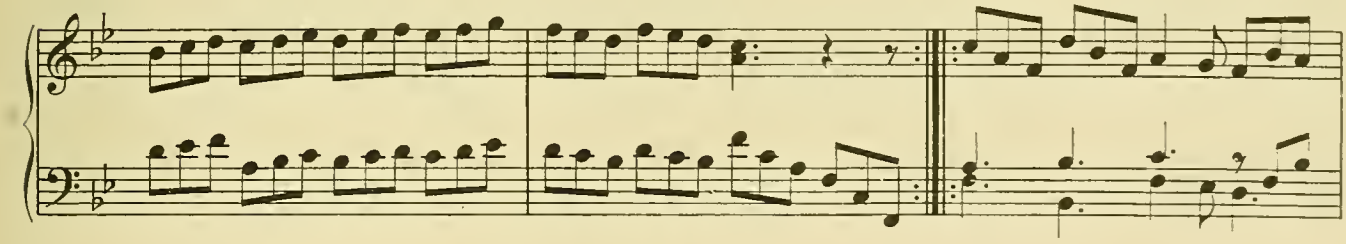


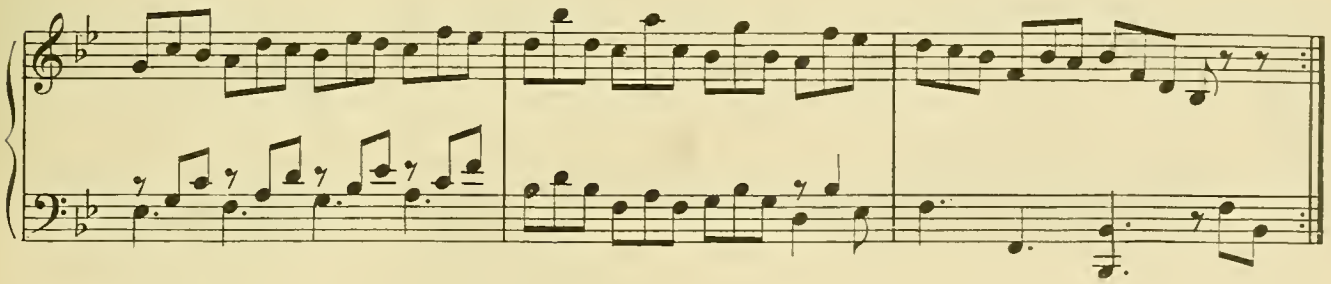




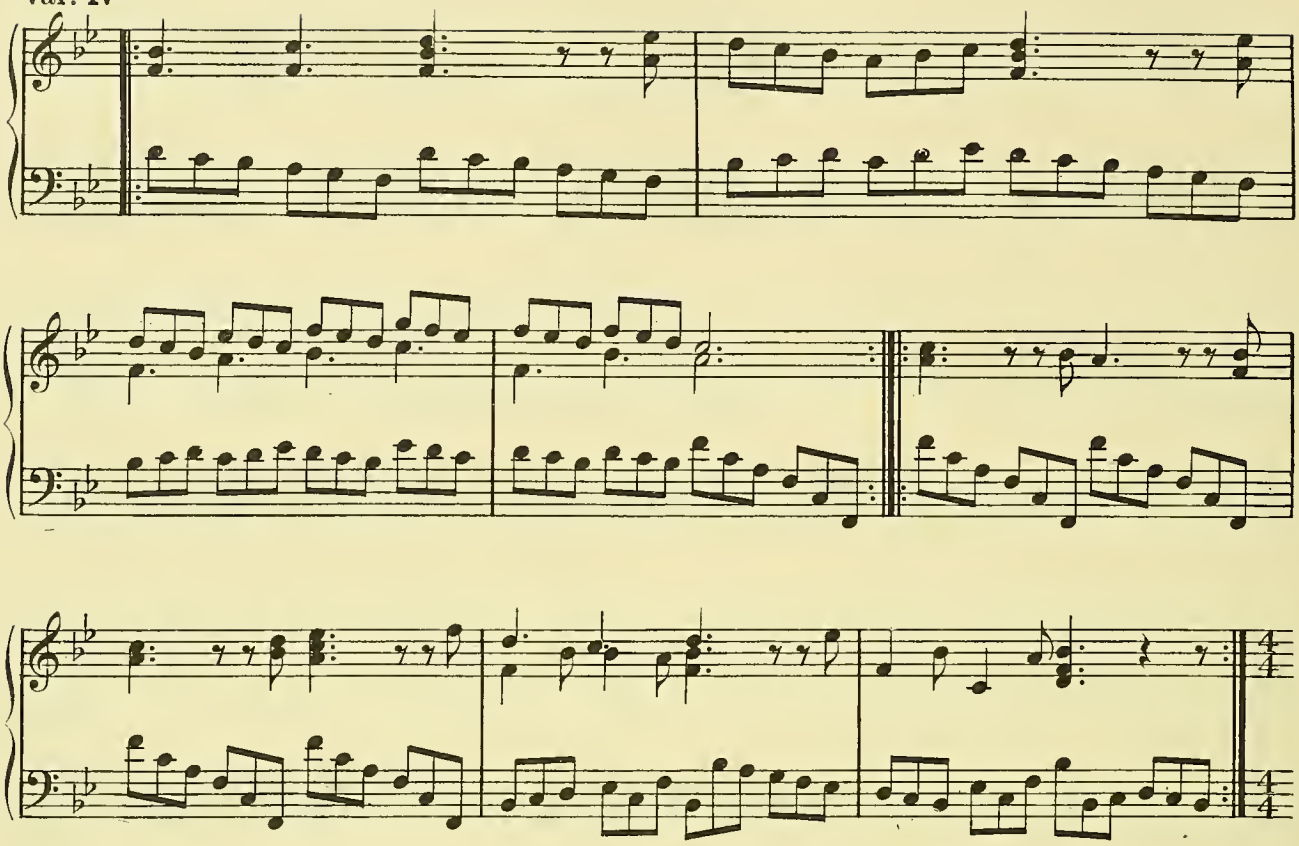
Var. III



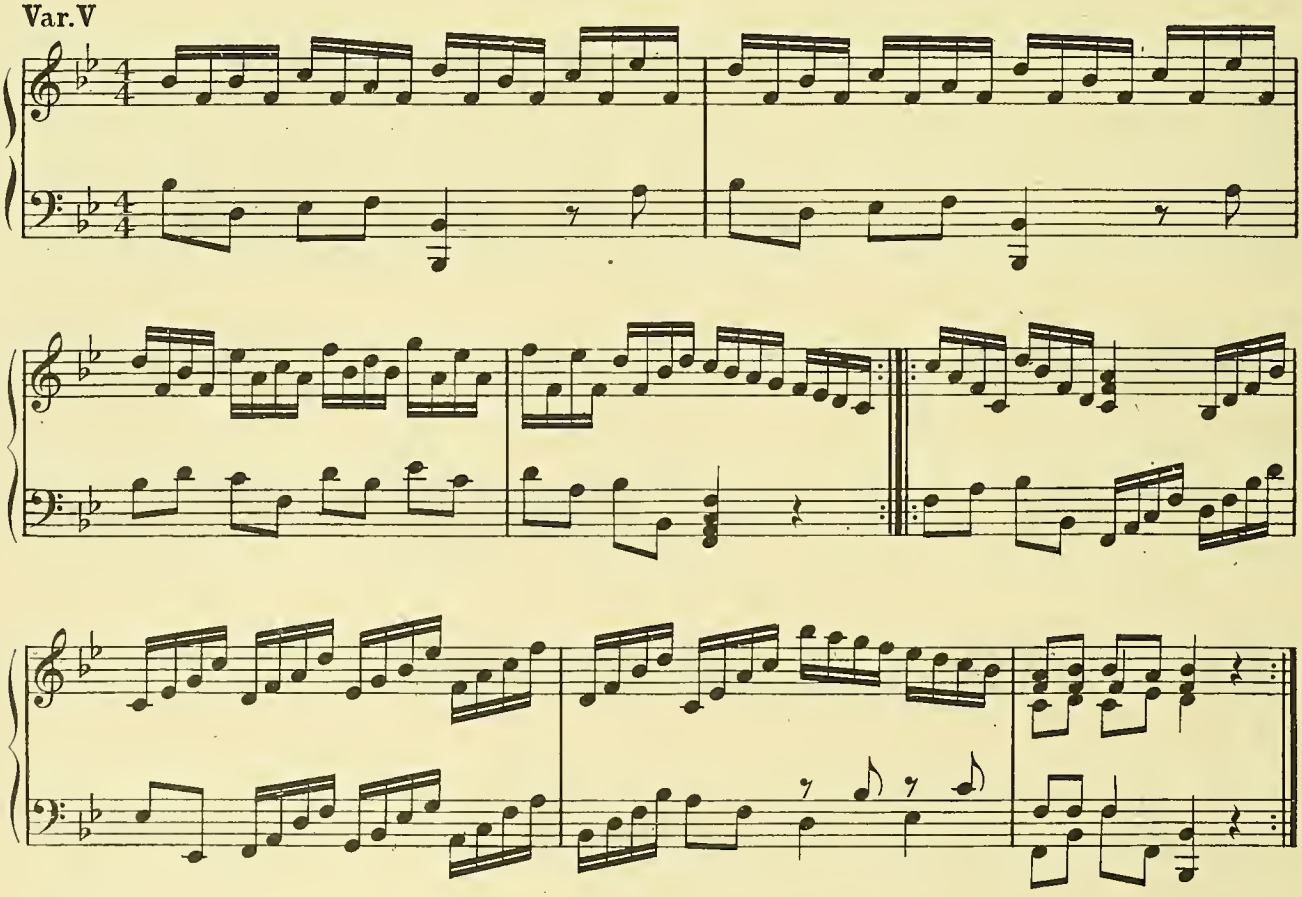




Var. IV



Var. V



MEMORANDA

MEMORANDA

CHAPTER EXAMINATION

1. Give the years of Brahms' birth and death. With what two great composers is his name frequently associated?

2. What styles are combined in the larger works of Brahms?

3. How does Brahms use *broken* chord figures?

4. What difference should there be (a) in the execution of the Trills in the Theme? (b) in the treatment of the melody in Variations I and II?

5. How should the Canon in Var. VI be treated?

6. In which voice is the theme found in Var. III?

7. In Var. XIV on which tone should the Trills begin?

8. What is the difference between Canon and canonic?

9. What is meant by a Musette? by a Drone Bass figure?

10. Of how many measures does the Fugue Subject consist? What is the order of announcing the subjects?

Student Percentage

Examined by Date

NATIONAL ACADEMY OF MUSIC
NEW YORK